

天鏡のアルデラミン
ねじ巻き精霊戦記
Alderamin on the Sky XIII
XIII
宇野朴人
Uno Bokuto
キャラクター原案 さんば挿
Illustration 竜徹
電撃文庫

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Alderamin on the Sky

XIII

UNO BOKUTO PRESENTS

「どもども。こちらソロークです」

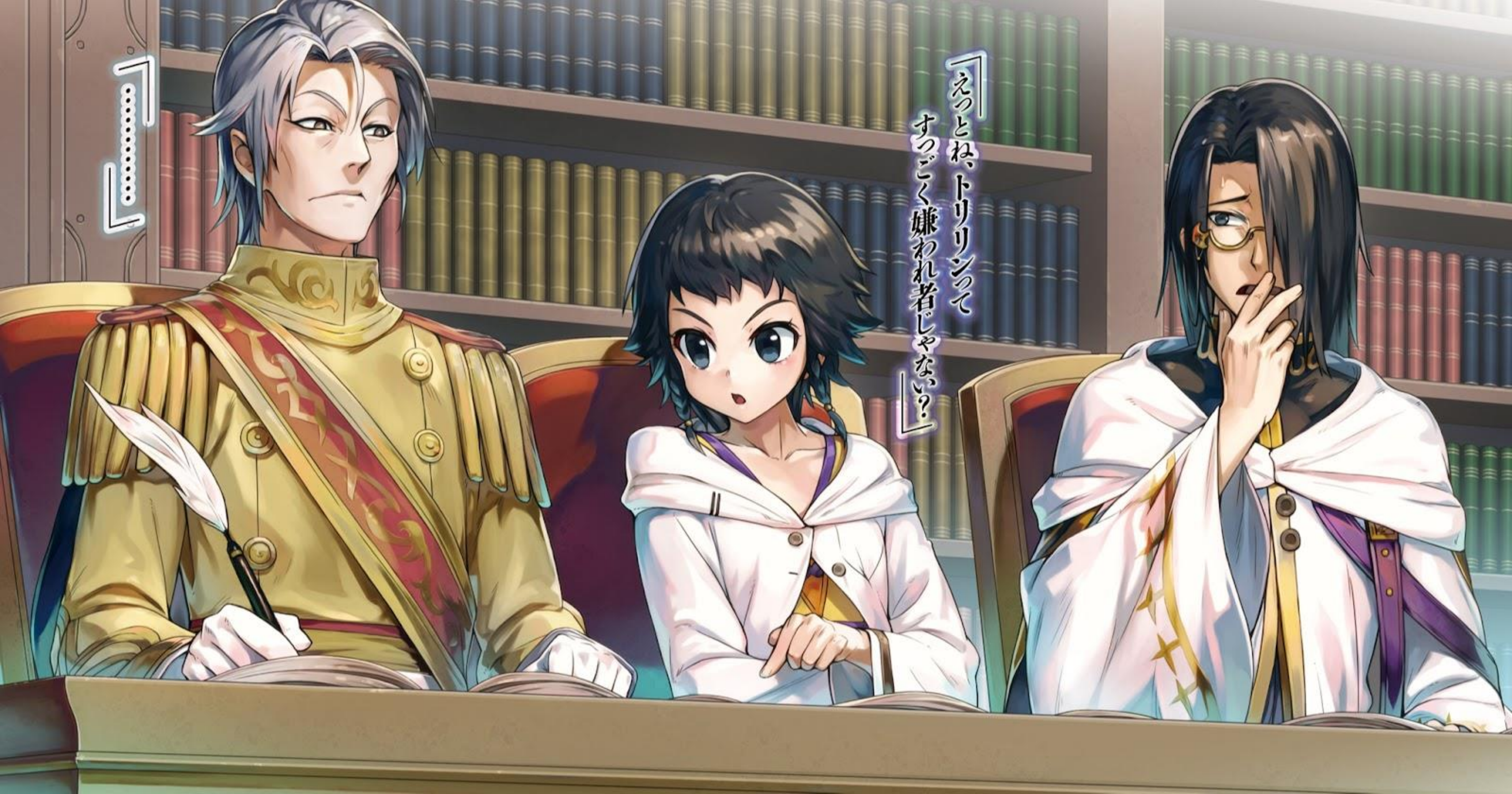
「いま訓練中なんですけど」

「は⁉ おい、

ちょっと待てコラ」

「……こっちが見えてんじゃないのか、あいつ……」

ILLUSTLATION:RYUTETSU
CHARACTER DESIGN:SOU SANBA


「えっとね、トリリンって
すっごく嫌われ者じゃない？」
「……」


ねじ巻き精霊戦記 天鏡のアルデラミン
●毎週金曜日深夜1時5分よりTOKYO MXほかにて放映中
原画／武藤信宏　仕上げ／森田郁世
背景／高須賀真二(ARTSTUDIO函館)
特効／伏原あかね(MADBOX)
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There was a saying— Love and Marriage were completely different things.

There were those who thought marriage was a result of nurturing the love between couples. But in reality, love was a psychological phenomenon between the couple, while marriage was a system imposed by society. And so, no matter how pure the love was between the subjects, there would be a lot of impurities mixed in.

「— This is a happy event. That's right, it's my cute niece after all.」

The impurity who thought the most highly of himself, Imperial Admiral Erynphin Jurgus represented his family seated at the head of the table— on behalf of the Jurgus clan.

「But if we think about their future, there is a big problem. A really big problem.」

When they heard him, the two seated at the head of the table— Matthew Tetzirich and Polminue Jurgus turned stiff. They were the guests of honor in name, but this only meant they were the center of the problem, and couldn't speak easily.

「Anyway— who will marry into whose family? We can't continue the talk without deciding this. Isn't that right, honourable friends of the Tetzirich clan.」

Admiral Jurgus said to the people opposite him. Colonel Mirtog Tetzirich, the head of his family, crossed his arms with a grunt.

「The Colonel is right— but it's a difficult decision to make.」

The Colonel said slowly. He didn't waver even once, even though he was facing the Jurgus, one of the Three Loyal Houses.

「It might sound like I'm bragging, but my son is the most outstanding soldier of the Tetzirich clan in recent years. I have great

hopes of him leading our clan to new heights. And of course, I also understand how big an honor it is if he was to marry into the Jurgus clan.」

「I can empathize with your feelings of wanting to hold on to your son. Very perfectly.」

Admiral Jurgus shrugged as he said that, and sighed at his niece.

「But— you understand our concerns right, Colonel? She might still be immature in interpersonal affairs, but my niece is still a Jurgus sailor. The future of the Imperial Navy is on her shoulders— I won't go that far, but there is a big chance that she will affect the future of the navy. I won't give her to the land, especially with the final battle with Kioka looming.」

The Admiral said firmly, and the Naval officers accompanying him also supported this:

「It's a little late to say this— but your son's achievements in the last naval battle deeply moved me. With the battlefield changing so swiftly, we need the strength of the young to open the future.」

「That's right. The Navy will treat your son at the same level as the Army. He will work together with Naval Lieutenant Polminue to prepare for the next war— I think it's a good idea.」

The Navy officers agreed with Admiral Jurgus. Colonel Tetzirich grunted loudly.

「You have a point… However, this is the time for my son to show his talents in the Army. The Field Marshal will also give him important assignments.」

When he heard that, Admiral Jurgus' lips started to cramp.

「By the Field Marshal, you mean— the person who had not said anything, and is just shoving food into his mouth?」



Everyone looked at where the Admiral's gaze fell. 「Hmm?」 on the opposite end from Matthew and Pommy— at the end of the table, where the lowest ranking person was supposed to be seated, the youth biting on mutton raised his head.

「What is it?」

「Ik-kun, Ik-kun, put the bones back on the plate before speaking.」

Torway seated beside him said quietly. After licking the bone of all its meat, Ikuta finally stopped eating.

「Phew— I understand the situation now. Admiral Jurgus, I want to discuss something with you.」

「What is it, Field Marshal Sir?」

The youth crossed his fingers before his chest and said with a serious face.

「Why don't we order a few more dishes? — Instead of mutton, I feel like chicken tonight.」

「You're not listening at all!」

Admiral Jurgus yelled, and Matthew drooped his shoulders. Ikuta shook his head with a laugh.

「No, I did listen— it's about which house Matthew and Pommy will marry into. As expected of my friend Matthew, both the Army and Navy are thirsting for you. 」

The youth nodded, looking between Admiral Jurgus and Colonel Tetzirich.

「Sigh, to be honest, this problem will be moot in the near future.」

「What do you mean?」

「Because Matthew will be seconded to the Navy.」

「Hey?」

Matthew heard that for the first time and stood up in a panic. Admiral Jurgus raised his eyebrows.

「This is unexpected, I thought you are attending because you don't want to hand him over to the Navy. Can I really keep him?」

「No, I'm not handing you over, this is just a secondment.」

Ikuta bit on the last piece of mutton on the plate with a smile.

「As you know, the Navy is incorporating Blast Cannons into their arsenal, but you don't have anyone with the experience to operate it, right? Who do you think will be teaching you about it?」

That made the slightly pudgy youth open his eyes wide.

「I-I will go? To teach the Navy to operate the Blast Cannons?」

「Yes. In many ways, you are the best choice.」

Ikuta nodded. Admiral Jurgus made no efforts to hide his frown.

「I can't accept this. Becoming a part of the Navy is different from being seconded as a consultant from the Army. We do want an instructor for the Blast Cannons— but we don't want to have a collar around our necks.」

The Naval officers nodded in agreement, but the dark-haired youth shook his head.

「It’s not a collar. How about thinking of it as a bridge? As you all know, for the future of the Navy, letting Matthew who is tied to the Jurgus clan stay in the Army has significant importance.」

「— What do you mean?」

「I mean Matthew will go beyond a Field Officer.」

The place was in an uproar. Colonel Tetzirich interjected cautiously.

「... Sir, I’m happy you think so highly of my son. But given the current situation, it’s too reckless to...」

「Yes, but I think he needs some uplifting words too— I think both of you understand what I want to say, right?」

Ikuta said as he alternated his views between the two family heads.

「Not just the upcoming final battle, it is also the time to think about the future after the war. The old system built around the Igsem is a thing of the past, so your positions can’t stay the same either. Please take part with the troublesome matters on land to a certain extent.
」

「... What an unpleasant topic.You want to drag the Jurgus family into politics?」

「I’m saying you have no choice but to take part. Your Navy can only maintain its rights and independence because the Igsem imposed absolute order within the nation. Now that the order has been lost, you will have to stand on your own two feet. You understand, right?
」

「... What do you want us to do, specifically?」

「I want you to strengthen your cooperation with the Army— that's the gist of it. We can't just dump all the Naval defence to you in this era. Kioka is a powerful army. I hope you can fight alongside us as part of the Imperial military, and not just the Navy. If not, we won't stand a chance.」

He said with a firm tone, which made the Naval officers groan. Ikuta's face brightened when he saw their reaction.

「Matthew's secondment is also part of this. Who will marry into whose family is a troubling issue— but no matter what happens, I will fully utilize them according to their abilities, please understand that. We can't afford to let talents in the Empire stay idle, I want them to perform properly on the big stage.」

The young Field Marshal's nonchalant but firm words made the Army and Naval officers cross their arms in deep thought. But their silence didn't last long as a member of the Jurgus family raised his hand and said:

「... Leaving that aside for now, we shouldn't delay this problem between the two families. This marriage will affect the organization of the military in the future, so we should decide on the plan as soon as possible.」

He was determined to continue the discussion. The officer beside him added:

「That's right. We are appealing again for the son of Tetzirich to serve in the sea...」

「Wait! Didn't the Field Marshal just said you have to strengthen your bonds with the Army!?」

Tetzirich's family members shouted in defiance. A Naval officer snorted.

「Cooperation sounds nice, but you are after the consolidation of the command system, right? If I may be blunt, your intentions to exert power over the Navy is obvious.」

「What do you mean by intention, this is an obvious fact. You seem to have forgotten that the Navy is just one department of the Imperial military.」

「I can’t pretend that I didn’t hear that. We have been protecting the oceans all this while, are you belittling the tradition of the Navy!?」

The discussion became heated. Ikuta groaned and crossed his arms as he watched this scene.

「Hmm～ I can’t settle this by giving an order, huh...」

「This is a problem, Ik-kun...」

Torway muttered, and watched the couple at the head of the table with worry. Matthew and Pommy weren't part of the discussion and couldn’t even get a word in edgewise. However—

「Pommy , Pommy .」

Someone interjected from an unexpected angle. Seated beside Colonel Tetzirich, his wife Hana Tetzirich ignored the intense debate and chatted with Pommy with a mischievous smile.

「...? Y-Yes.」

After Pommy answered puzzledly, Hanna leaned forth and continued:

「I have been meaning to ask, what do you like about my son?」

「Huh?」

Hanna asked excitedly, and Pommy couldn't answer immediately and blushed. Colonel Tetzirich who heard that cut in:

「Hanna, leave that for later...」

「Leave the troublesome matters for later.」

Her tone turned sharp and she replied harshly. Her gaze turned from her husband who was reeling back to Pommy. The gutsy woman of the Tetzirich house smiled again.

「Sorry about that. This is a joyous occasion, but it must be awkward for you. The food will taste bad with all those scary faces around you.」

The officers locked in debate were shocked by that sharp sarcasm. One of them said in surprise:

「No, Madam Tetzirich, even if you say that, your son's marriage will have serious implications—」

「Know the time and place for that!」

Hanna yelled and overwhelmed the place. She stared at the round eyed soldiers and declared without giving any grounds.

「Is this the place to discuss the future of the Imperial military? No, this is a feast to celebrate the future of the young married couple. And what are you doing— squabbling and showing the avarice of the Naval and Army. If this goes on, the couple caught in the middle will be torn apart!」

She spoke up in defence of Matthew and Pommy. When both families were dumbstruck by her spirit, the dark-haired youth said:

「You're absolutely right, Mdm Hanna. I'm sorry for being inconsiderate.」

Torway and he bowed in apology. However, Hanna just shook her head with a smile.

「You two are fine, Ikuta, Torway. You knew this would happen and are trying to relax the mood, right? The news of Matthew's secondment is also to stop any quarrels preemptively. But my family members can't read the mood at all...」

She glared sternly at her husband. Facing the wrath of his wife, Colonel Tetzirich reflected on his actions.

「Wait, wait, Hanna. It's my fault for my shallow thinking.」

「What's the use of apologizing to me!? Apologize to Pommy!」

When he heard her say that sternly, the Colonel turned to Pommy .

「I'm sorry, Polminue. My wife is right, this feast is held in the honour of you and my son, but we ignored you and started arguing...」

「Hmm? N-No, not at all...!」

Pommy panicked when a man far older than her apologized. At this moment— Admiral Erynphin Jurgus sighed when he saw that, and turned to the slightly plump youth.

「... We also acknowledge that squabble earlier lacks class. Will that be fine, Matthew?」

「Ah...!」

Matthew turned stiff when the boss of the pirate navy apologized to him. In contrast to him, Hanna was smiling. If the two families were to build a strong bond, Colonel Tetzirich shouldn't be the only one apologizing— She realized what the Admiral was thinking.

「Oh, so you are actually good guys too!」

Hanna said happily, and told the awkward officers:

「Let's put aside the problems of clans and the military for today, okay? It's not an issue that can be resolved so easily. Even if an intense debate is inevitable— it's uncouth to discuss it during the first meeting between both families, correct?」

She said as she stood up and went behind Matthew and Pommy. She put her arms around their shoulders and hugged them tight, and announced with a brilliant smile.

「Instead of arguing, why don't we celebrate this joyous event? We have new family members now— this is worth celebrating for everyone here, right?」

「— This is a very interesting gathering.」

The six hours gathering ended, and after seeing off the kin from both families to their hotels, Ikuta, Torway, Matthew and Pommy met up again in a nearby restaurant to take a break.

「Are you kidding me? I'm beat… with those participants, it's no different from a military conference. And as expected, the Army and Navy quarreled, and my mother made a scene...」

Matthew leaned back on his chair exhaustedly. Pommy beside him curled her lips.

「Is that so? I'm glad though, and I even greeted your parents.」

「Yes, you hit it off with my parents in no time… Your parents came too, and they are really scrutinizing me very closely, so I have to be careful when I speak with them.」

「Don’t worry, Ma-kun. You acted well and didn’t leave any negative impressions.」

Torway added to sooth Matthew. The dark-haired youth nodded.

「For me, I’m happy to see the gutsy side of Mdm Hanna— and the Kiln Roasted Chicken served towards the end is a masterpiece. Since no one was eating much, I got it all to myself.」

「You are the only one focused on eating at that gathering! You even ordered more dishes, just how thick skinned are you!?」

Ignoring the admonishment, Ikuta shoved the iced dessert into his mouth. Pommy giggled.

「...Don’t tell anyone, but my uncle often talks about the Field Marshal. He says that you’re pretending to be retarded, but has sharp eyes that makes it difficult for him to act. It might not be obvious, but 90% of his words are compliments.」

「I’m honoured, and I also think Admiral Jurgus is a worthy opponent too. Especially his source of funding which seemed a little suspicious. I hope we can work cordially together from now on.」

Ikuta showed a meaningful smile before turning to Matthew and Pommy.

「In any case, setting aside all the political issues, I want to sincerely congratulate the both of you… It might not sound convincing because of the position I’m in, but I want to give you my blessings as a friend.」

Ikuta’s smile was lonely. Sensing his melancholy from that expression, Matthew shook his head.

「... Don't look down on me. There might be a lot of troubles, but I won't turn down your feelings.」

「I'm glad that you can accept that—」

Ikuta said sincerely, then raised his cup of tea towards Matthew and Pommy.

In another place, about half a day ago. On this day, the lecture hall built in the south of the Imperial Capital Banhataal was hosting an historic event.

The place was filled with people, with troubled and uneasy voices echoing out loud. The seats encompass the stage like a fan for the sake of enjoying a performance, but it was used in an entirely different way instead.

「— Ladies and gentlemen, please lower your volume, it is about to begin.」

Seeing that it was time, the man on the stage said with a serious voice. The chattering voices vanished like the receding tide, filling the air with silence and tension. After looking around him, the man said again.

「Thank you, everyone. Well then— and now, I will announce the first session of the Imperial Parliament's opening. Apologies for my late introduction, I'm the chair of this session, Marf Adiff. Pardon me if I make any mistakes due to my lack of experience.」

With the gazes of the participants on him, Adiff continued:

「Aside from the breaks and resting in your rooms, for the next fifteen days, please join us in discussing the issues faced by the various provinces. The opinions will be recorded by the secretary and submitted to the Empress, to be scrutinized by Her Majesty and her

cabinet. Your opinions will be the important basis to affirm all important proposals, so we must discuss it actively— this is the edict of the Empress.」

The place turned rowdy again. Seeing their concerns, Adiff added:

「I think many of you will feel uneasy about this, but there is no doubt that this is what Empress Chamille wishes for. Furthermore, none of the invitees are nobles. The Empress hope for the discussion to produce the 『voice of the people』, including any criticism of the ruling government.」

Uneasiness spread out amongst the participants like a wave. They may speak freely, and even criticize— even if they were asked that, they wouldn't dare speak freely about the Empress who had cut off countless heads. There were some who suspected this meeting was a trap to lure out potential rebels.

「Well then, I won't hold back.」

While doubt was hanging in the air, a person stood up to lead the way. She was petite and had brown skin. The surprised gazes of the people focused on the head of the Shinnack Tribe, who hailed from the Yunakura province to the east of the Empire.

「I'm the Tribal Chief of the Shinnack Tribe, Nanak Dar. I have three requests, first is the supply of horses and cows for agricultural use. Compared to the size of the land, the number of farming livestock is too small. Second, is the permission to use the Cathedral nearby. To avoid conflict with the Imperials, we have been trying to make do with the only Cathedral in our territory, but it's inconvenient for our tribesman staying far away. Third, allow us to participate in the market. Aside from the provisions purchased by the army, we want to sell our own produce.」

The figure of Nanak standing tall and speaking made the crowd stare in disbelief. The northern unrest where the Imperial Army came into conflict against the Shinnack Tribes— that was still fresh in everyone's mind. They might be living peacefully performing agricultural work under the supervision of the Imperial Army, but many citizens still held deeply rooted bias against the Shinnack Tribe. She should be the least dignified person of them all.

「Especially the first and second request, the situation will worsen if it's not approved quickly, and will directly affect next year's harvest. With the upcoming war, increasing the amount of food should be a great boon for you.」

More importantly, what she said would reach the Empress' ears. The participants were fearful— despite having a lower standing than others, did that woman not fear death?

Nanak said amidst the tense atmosphere. Adiff signalled the secretary who was recording the contents, and smiled at Nanak.

「A great speech that summarized the important points, Her Majesty will be pleased— I hope everyone can express your views as earnestly as Ms Nanak.」

He accepted Nanak's words positively. When they heard what the chairman said, the participants looked at each other.

「— Your Majesty, this is the minutes for today's meeting.」

On that night, Yorga handed a stack of papers to Chamille working in her office. She stopped her stamping of the documents and took the papers, and then browsed through it.

「... Hmm. It's not a lively debate, but this isn't bad for the first day, right?」

「Yes. Chief Nanak Dar of the Shinnack Tribe bravely spoke up first, which encouraged the other participants. Since she could give such an in depth view with her standings, the others thought they could bring up a few points too.」

「I know that woman wouldn't be afraid, so I asked her to be the incitor on the first day. That appears to be the right choice— reward the first speaker, Nanak Dar. Make a big show of it, so it will spread to the other participants.」

Yorga bowed respectfully when he heard that. The Empress made a face of self mockery.

「A tyrant ruling through terror and an iron fist is setting up a parliament to listen to the people? … To the citizens, this is a contradictory way of governance.」

「Implementing a new system of governance will naturally make the citizens confused. The problem is whether the new system will operate smoothly.」

「... Hmm, yes, you're right.」

Chamille pondered and then shook her head. When her thoughts leaned towards self reproach, Yorga would make a conscious effort to stop her. This was one of his small attempts to heal the girl's soul.

「— We have a message. It's from Ikuta.」

At this moment, Cia that was on the table spoke. Chamille looked at it.

「It's Solork huh, accept the call— It's me, can you hear me?」

「— Yes, crystal clear. I just met up with Nanak. Have you received the information about the meeting?」

At the same time, inside a teahouse in a corner of the capital, Ikuta was speaking with Chamille in the palace.

「Yes, I just saw the minutes. It's great for the first day. Is Nanak Dar with you?」

The Empress' voice could be heard through the Sprite. Nanak who was called grunted.

「Yes, I'm here. I said what I wanted to, you got a problem with that?」

「Don't diss me so suddenly. It's the opposite, the debate became lively thanks to you. I'm grateful for your help.」

The Empress' unexpected compliment made Nanak open her eyes wide.

「... I will accept your thanks. However, that won't keep my comrades fed.」

「I know. I intend to respond immediately to the loan of the livestocks and the usage of the Cathedral. Participating in the market will need some work, but I won't let you wait long. Furthermore, I will give a separate reward for your effort today, please come see me at 10 am in the palace tomorrow. Don't be late.」

「You are haughty even when you are thanking others!」

「I'm still the Empress after all— Are Matthew and Polminue Jurgus there too?」

When she heard the Empress call her, Pommy quickly stood up. As she was thinking about what to say, Matthew answered:

「Yes, we are here. We already heard everything.」

「I-It’s an honour, Your Majesty...!」

「Hmm— how’s the first meeting between both families? I think Erynphin Jurgus will be a pain to deal with under such a situation. 」

「Yes, I totally get that… My Dad refused to give in too. The engagement is officially decided. But it seems I will be seconded to the Navy… Your Majesty, do you know about that?」

「Don’t you know? I think I discussed this with Solork ages ago… Oh, no, I understand. Forgive him, Matthew, it’s just a prank by that guy.」

The Empress realized what happened and sighed through the Sprite. Matthew and Pommy glared at him, but the dark-haired youth showed a carefree smile.

「It’s not a prank. A good friend will always deliver good news with a surprise.」

「You will receive retributions if you keep doing it that— Anyway, congratulations on your engagement, may you be happy forever— it’s difficult for me to say this given the circumstances, but I sincerely wish you happiness.」

Sensing the other party’s nervousness, Chamille ended the call out of consideration shortly after. At that moment, the stiff shouldered Pommy collapsed onto her chair.

「I-I’m so nervous… Field Marshal Sir, I’m very happy to receive the blessings of Her Majesty, but please don’t call her so suddenly...」

「Haha, sorry about that. After this function was released, I can’t help wanting to call other people.」

Ikuta patted Kusu’s head with a smile. Matthew stared at this scene.

「It’s amazing to me no matter how many times I use it. Speaking with someone far away, as if they are right before me… It’s like Magic.」

Torway and Pommy nodded in agreement. The function they mistook for magic was the most substantial result from the Three Nation Conference. Ikuta gently picked up Kusu.

「It might look like Magic now, but this is a technology achievable through Science sooner or later. We have to get used to it first, because we will have more chance of speaking through this function instead of face to face in the future.」

When Ikuta said that, Nanak said quietly.

「... That girl changed a little.」

「Hmm?」

「That blondie. When I talked to her, I can feel she is very different from before. She was like an unsheathed sword before, but she’s more relaxed now.」

She snorted after saying that. The dark-haired youth smiled.

「I’m glad that Nana thinks so too— Chamille’s environment has improved a lot. So she is also changing, although it might be a little slow.」

He said gently, and Nanak furrowed her brows tighter. Ikuta suddenly looked at her with squinting eyes.

「But Nana, you have also changed a lot. Did you study before joining the Parliament? Like laws and other things.」

「Yes, I did learn that. Because you like smart women.」

She responded with sharp sarcasm, even Ikuta was at a loss for words. Feeling much better because of that, Nanak continued:

「That's half the reason, the other is out of necessity. If I don't have the knowledge, I can't ask for anything from those glibbed tongue people in the capital. After we settled down in the Yunakura province, Mirt and Hanna taught me a lot.」

She mentioned these two names with an intimate tone. She was referring to Mirtog Tetzirich and Hanna Tetzirich who supported the Shinnack Tribe in the Yunakura province. When she mentioned his parents, Matthew nodded knowingly.

「Yes, my mother also mentioned it… Along with Pommy, it's like she got two daughters, and is really happy.」

「You are talking as if it doesn't involve you. Hanna is really worried about you, fatty. Why don't you write her a letter from time to time?」

「Ughh.」

That was absolute right, which made Matthew quiet. The sight of him made the others smile.

Chapter 1: Heading Towards the Final Battle

The palace was built in the center of Imperial Capital Banhataal. Starting from the restricted zone where the Empress lives, all sorts of government facilities were erected inside the vast lands— in one corner was a place frequented by Ikuta, Chamille, and other key people of the Empire.

Inside the room with clean, fresh air, a doctor was facing a patient.

「... Please proceed.」

「Yes.」

As the doctor watched, the female patient sitting on the bed— Haro, started to sew. This was work that couldn't be done without dexterous fingers. She mended the hole in the cloth with the same technique as sewing the wounds on the injured.

「Any pain or discomfort?」

「It doesn't hurt, and my fingers' reaction had gotten much better. 」

She answered as she tied a knot to finish the sewing. The doctor nodded, and then placed two pouches filled with beans on Haro's lap.

「Try squeezing it hard.」

Haro took a pouch in each hand as instructed. The beans made a crunch sound as she squeezed.

「... My grip has weakened a lot.」

「I’m thinking the opposite. It’s incredible that you recovered to this extent.」

This was another way of telling her she passed. When Haro relaxed her hand, the doctor crossed her arms and looked at Haro’s face.

「Very good. I’m vexed that my prediction is overturned, but it can’t be helped. With my authority as a doctor, I certify that Haroma Becker has recovered enough to resume normal and military activities… Congratulations on your recovery, you have worked hard.」

The doctor congratulated her in a warm and simple way. Haro smiled and bowed.

「Thank you… It’s all thanks to your treatment, Doctor.」

「Hmmp, you did 90% of the work yourself. Because you have been rehabilitating while I wasn’t watching. I can earn more money if I drag out the treatment, but you aren’t cute for a patient at all.」

Haro smiled. Digging at people was something this doctor liked to do. The doctor kept her tools for the diagnosis into her tool bag and said.

「And now, this is just idle chatting… Are you going to work for Ikuta from now on?」

「Yes, for the rest of my life.」

Haro answered without hesitation. The Doctor sighed heavily.

「An immediate answer? —That man is as popular as ever.」

The Doctor said with a stupefied face, and closed the bag. Haro thought about it and continued the topic:

「Doctor, Ikuta-san knew you during his student days, right?」

「Yes. I was also a third class doctor back then, and befriended him through the exchange of medical data with Anarai Khan. After I gave him medicine for hangovers, he started sticking to me, and woo me whenever we met.」

「Fufu, I get that.」

「That's right. When we met again after a long time, he became a Field Marshal using a walking stick, and was even raising a child, which didn't fit well with his nature. In less than ten years, his life changed drastically.」

She said as she made the Fire Sprite on the table spit fire to light her cigar. She knew the Doctor was a chain smoker, but this was the first time she saw her smoking a cigar.

She smoked in silence for a while, then hurried footsteps came from the corridor. The doctor smiled wryly.

「Speak of the devil— It's not locked, come in.」

On her urging, faces familiar to Haro rushed in. Ikuta, Chamille, Torway and Matthew. Time was precious to all of them, but they still cleared their schedule for Haro without hesitation.

「Sorry for the intrusion.」 「Haro, how are you feeling—」

Torway and Chamille looked at Haro with dazed eyes. Haro got up from her bed, then waved her hands to dispel their worries.



「As you can see, I have been revived! Sorry for making everyone worry!」

「Ohh...! So, all your injuries have recovered?」

「Congratulations on your recovery, Haro-san!」 「I'm relieved...!」

Torway, Matthew, and Chamille held Haro's hands one by one, happy for her recovery. Ikuta observed her at the same time.

「Hmm… It's true, your fingernails have grown out. However, I can't tell if you have really recovered. Well, I need you to take off your clothes for a thorough check up—」

「Fufu, Solork, how many months do you want to spend bedridden? State the number that you wish.」

「Wait, Chamille, lay down your fists. Your strength in whalloping people is no joke nowadays.」

Sensing the girl's killing intent, Ikuta adopted a defensive posture in a panic. Seeing him act this way made Haro smile and patted her breasts.

「Don't hesitate to assign tasks to me, to make up for the time I had been away. Don't worry that I just recovered, because my body is getting better!」

「That's what she said— Doctor, what's the actual situation?」

「She is more or less correct, but the soldiers have a heavy workload on the grounds, please keep her work within common sense. Have adequate food and rest, look for me immediately at any sign of discomfort. Understood?」

「Yes! Thank you, Doctor!」

Haro lowered her head in apology. Ikuta was smiling at the Doctor too.

「We are having a party tonight to celebrate her recovery. Do join us if it is convenient for you, Doctor.」

「I'm happy that you invited me, but I will pass. I still need to check on a few other patients today, a third rate doctor is still busy, you know?」

She said and then left the room swiftly with her tool bag. The dark-haired youth said softly to her back.

「Yes, I understand— when I learned that my comrade was badly injured, what comes to mind is your face, Doctor. You are the best Doctor that I know.」

「... Hmmp. You're still the same with your unique taste.」

The doctor said with a dumbstruck face, then added:

「But I'm grateful that you are relying on me during such times— Thanks to you, I will have a good story to tell when I visit the cemetery.」

She said in a gentle voice before leaving. As he watched her go with respectful eyes, Matthew suddenly asked.

「... Hey, who is she? I know she is a great Doctor since you requested for her help.」

Ikuta thought about his words before quietly saying.

「— Some time in the past, in a settlement somewhere in the Central of the Empire, there was an epidemic spread by livestocks. Since it didn't happen too long ago, Chamille might know about it.」

When he said that, the girl searched her memories and found an incident that matched these features.

「There was an epidemic in Central— The Cadilla crisis? I wasn't born yet, but I heard almost a thousand died from the epidemic that started in a settlement.」

The dark-haired youth nodded at the summary of the disaster stated by the Empress.

「... Back then, the investigation she led detected the cause of the epidemic, and saved many lives with the treatment they developed. There were many deaths, but it was contained thanks to her efforts.」

「Huh— isn't she a famous Doctor then!?」

The unexpected history surprised Matthew and the others. However, in contrast to their reaction, Ikuta said plainly.

「That's right, she saved a lot of people… After her husband and daughter died from that epidemic.」

The four of them were at a loss for words. Ikuta stared at the passageway where the Doctor left through, and bit his lower lip vexingly.

「That's why she calls herself third rate. Even if the people she saved called her a great Doctor, she insisted on saying that—」

The next day, in the Central Army Base. On Haro's first day back on duty, before Major Megu and his other adjutants reported to work, Ikuta summoned her to his office.

「— I have many tasks for you, but first, watch what I'm doing.」

He signalled to his desk. He had stationery by his hand, and five Sprites including Kusu surrounded him in a half circle. This was a strange scene for the workplace of a military officer.

「As you know, this is my work desk. But it only turned out like this recently, and is still being adjusted.」

Shortly after he said that, Kusu spoke.

「— Incoming call. From General Shiba.」

「See, a call came in right away. Kusu, connect.」

On Ikuta's urging, Haro could hear a rough voice coming from Kusu.

「— General Kubalha Shiba here. Can you hear me, Field Marshal Sir?」

「Ikuta Solork speaking. I hear you loud and clear. What's up?」

「I want to ask your opinion about the new Blast Cannon unit.」

「Understood. Tell me what's bothering you.」

The youth converse with a person far away as if they were face to face. This absurd scene made Haro gasp. A moment later, Ikuta finished his call with General Shiba and turned to her.

「— It feels like this. We can communicate with the people on scene without going through a messenger. How about it? Doesn't this work environment suits the lazy me perfectly?」

Ikuta said as he rocked his chair. This was his loot for going through the Trial of God at the Three Nation Conference— the opening of the communication function possessed by the Sprites.

The Jade Voice Broadcast was the best proof that people in the past knew that the Sprites had an unknown way of sending

communication. When they passed the trial, the Sprites said 「Intelligence has reached the set standard」, so part of the communication functions has been released.

「My Mia has this function too, so I imagined this situation… But this is shocking, a method that surpasses all existing means of communication. If this method become commonplace, then we won't need messengers or pigeons, right?」

「Yes, but the number of unlocked Sprites are limited in numbers, so it won't be a revolutionary change on such a large scale. For now, it will be integrated into the existing system as a supplement— But just with that, the flexibility and mobility of the Imperial Army will increase dramatically.」

Ikuta concluded as he watched the Sprites on the table. To the youth, they were a window to a wide world.

「Where to deploy the limited number of Sprites, and how many are needed for the most efficient usage— We are still figuring that out. The white pretty boy is probably agonizing over this problem in Kioka too. But he isn't the head of the military yet, and will face a lot of problems. Serve him right.」

Ikuta cursed at the enemy's general, but his tone wasn't as prickly now. Haro was surprised. She wondered if he had a change of heart at the Three Nation Conference while she was bedridden.

「For the people with partners that have the communication function, first is Chamille and me. We are the heads of the military and political affairs, so that's obvious. Next is the high level bureaucrat above third grade, and Field-grade military officers. And of course, all the members of the 『Knights Corp』 possess the function. And also— in order to receive unfiltered information on site, I let several Junior Officers I have high hopes for have the

function too. However, as a rule, orders can't be issued from lower rank officers to the upper ranks in the army.」

Ikuta continued. When she heard that, the person who was silent in Haro's heart— Patrenshina said as she deduced how the conversation would progress.

「... This is an ideal espionage tool for all types of agents. Can I assume this is our work?」

She said tensely, but Ikuta stabbed her flank with his right index finger.

「— Kyaa?」

「I'm happy that you're willing to work, but you're thinking too much, Patrenshina. I will make this clear, I have no intention of giving you such work in the future. This might change in an emergency, but not letting the situation come to this is also my job. So, can you stop being so eager about that?」

「I-I know! I know! Stop poking my belly!」

She backed away in a panic from the surprise attack. Ikuta continued with a smile:

「Haha— but the idea isn't too far off. That's because— I want you two to manage the morale of the Imperial army from a different angle of a commander.」

These unexpected words made Patrenshina stare with her eyes wide. A moment of silence later, Haro appeared again.

「Manage morale? Specifically… what does that job entails?」

「Grasp what the mentally of a unit on site is leaning towards, and return them back to normal— something like that. Simply put, it's

mental health maintenance. I hope you can make it part of the health maintenance of the medics, and go more in depth.」

Ikuta said and interlocked his fingers before his chest with a serious face.

「My experience in the Northern Unrest made me realize its importance. I hope you can think back on it. The soldiers suppressed their emotions, turned edgy and committed violence against non combatants— Don't you think this can be prevented if we understand their emotional state? The commander who doesn't understand the situation on the grounds might give an order that pushes the frontline soldiers to the brink— that's a common occurrence in war, and I want to prevent that.」

There was an intense resolve in his tone, and Haro nodded in agreement. Ikuta then asked the other Haro.

「Patrenshina, you have successfully done the opposite in the past. During the Church of Aldera devotees Grand Escape and the war following that, you subtly misdirected the commanders and soldiers to move in the way you wanted— I want to use your outstanding skills in a more constructive manner.」

The youth said without any hesitation— He wanted her to support the Imperial soldiers that she pushed to the edge in the past. Patrenshina frowned for more reason than one.

「You want me to detect the problem when the commanders and soldiers' minds are turning negative, and adjust for it adequately?... It is possible, but the request is too vague. Unlike the body, there are no normal standards for mentally. It will be a problem if the soldiers go into battle without some degree of tension, correct? Depending on the situation, the mental state will need to be different too.」

「Hmm, I feel the same. So I want to leave the judgement to the both of you. You have to gauge what the upper and lower standards— Can you do it?」

Ikuta taunted lightly. Patrenshina turned her face to the side in anger.

「It's not impossible… But you know how dangerous this is? If you leave everything to us, then we can destroy the Imperial Army if we want to. Aren't you scared?」

「I'm not. Because you won't do such a thing.」

「No, even though I won't do it...」

「Then it's fine. Basically, I won't let people I don't completely trust into this room. I let them sit in a position where they can stab me in the back because I trust them.」

The youth said casually, and Patrenshina couldn't complain any more. She glared at him with furrowed brows, then switched to Haro as if she was running away.

「She hid from embarrassment… You are getting good at dealing with her.」

「Because I don't intend to use any schemes— Just like the joy of betraying her comrades in secret, she also gets joy from gaining the trust of others. I hope she can acknowledge that feeling.」

Ikuta said with a smile and straightened his back.

「Anyway, just treat this as a rehearsal before your return to duty, and stay with me. I have things to work on, and I want to introduce my adjutant to you too.」

「Okay, I will be glad to take you up on that. But first… Want some tea?」

「Yes. To be honest, this is an important factor for my mental health.
」

They looked at each other and smiled, and began their work in this harmonious atmosphere.

＊

In the same afternoon. In a grassland tens of kilometres from the Central Army base, Imperial soldiers formed into waves were panting.

「Huff〜 huff〜...!」 「Hah〜 hah〜...!」

Their movement speed was slowing from the accumulated fatigue, and the formation was crumbling from soldiers who couldn't keep pace. They were on the edge mentally, and a shout came from the front of the formation.

「— What, you are already tired!? We have only set off for four hours!」

The one yelling was a female officer younger than most of the troops— Second Lieutenant Suya Mittokarifu. At the same time, the overall commander Sarihasrag at the rear of the formation said.

「H-Hey, Second Lieutenant Mittokarifu...」

「Getting out of breath from just that is proof that you are too relaxed both mentally and physically! If you go to the battlefield, you will be killed in an instant! Those with battle experience, remember the tension you felt at the frontlines, those without, imagine being

shot the moment you stop moving your feet! You are the only one who can save yourself!」

Her firm voice made the soldiers straighten their backs, a technique she obtained by going through many life and death situations with Ikuta. The number of people who took her lightly because of her age and her background of rising through the ranks decreased by the day.

「Continue the march. Is that fine, Major Sarihasrag?」

After her loud pep talk, she approached her superior officer and said. Sarihasrag who was reeling back a little answered:

「No, wait, Second Lieutenant, at least a short break—」

「No. This is training to simulate retreat from the frontlines. If we stop here, the enemy will catch up.」

She refused to budge. Sariha couldn't think of a good rebuke, and Suya saw it as him giving his silent consent, then returned to the fore of the formation. The eldest son of the Remeon clicked his tongue as he watched her back.

「She has been going nonstop at the front since the start of the training, what's with her endurance...」

「But she's right, brother. The troop's stamina had weakened more than expected because we have been neglecting long distance marching exercise. This is adequate training to rebuild their endurance.」

「But there has to be a limit. I let her take the lead to test her mettle… But this is beyond my expectations. She's not Solork's disciple, her personality is completely different from him!」

While Sariha was complaining, his Wind Sprite partner received a notification. When he heard that name, he picked up the Sprite and connected the call.

「— Pardon me for disturbing your training, big bro Sariha. This is Solork.」

「You called at the right time! Hey, what's with the subordinate you assigned to me!? Someone who just got promoted from a Warrant Officer won't be so harsh on veteran Sergeants! Didn't you teach her how to slack off like you!?」

「I did, this is the result of me teaching her. She probably used me as a negative example. Sigh, I'm proud to have an outstanding disciple.」

「Damn it, how did you teach your subordinate!? I won't be able to stand it if this goes on, so tell her off!」

「Got it. I will tell her to keep it up as her teacher. Thank you for your situation report. Well then, work hard on your training.」

「Huh? Hey, wait—」

The call cut off before he could say another word. Sariha stamped his feet as he looked at his silent partner.

Shortly after, Suya who was at the head of the formation also received a call. Her face turned moody and she answered crudely.

「... Mittokarifu speaking. What is it, Regimental commander? I'm in the middle of training.」

「Yes, I was wondering if you're working hard~ How's brother Remeon's unit?」

The other party said with his usual carefree tone. She had complicated feelings of frustration and joy, and forced herself to answer coldly.

「... They are very proficient with the rifle, but they focused too much on that, and neglected their basic training. I'm retraining the unit right now… Or rather, that should be your intention when you assigned me here, Regimental Commander.」

「I will try to send the right personnel to the right place for manpower deployment. Anyway, you are doing great, continue retraining them this way. If you want to propose anything to big bro Sariha, the trick is to tell Captain Sushuraf ahead of time.」

「I noticed this trivial thing on the first day— Is that all? I'm hanging up.」

Suya wanted to end the call. But before that, a voice came from the other end.

「Oh, wait, one last thing— It's hard to differentiate the right path at the next junction, so be careful. Check properly with your map and compass.」

The call ended for real after he told her that. Suya frowned as she watched the road ahead. One of the paths was covered by thick foliage, and if she didn't look carefully, she wouldn't find the path leading ahead.

「... As if he was seeing it with his own eyes.」

She grit her teeth. After learning so much, the dark-haired youth was still unfathomable to her.

「Am I still playing in his palm?... Damn it, this is infuriating!」

She muttered, and stamped her feet just like Sariha to the rear.

＊

The life of a soldier wasn't just harsh physical training. In the base, high ranking officers had to work on their tasks too.

「......Lieutenant Colonel Melza, can I have a moment?」

「Yes, what is it, Brigadier General Sazarf.」

Without stopping her hands shifting the documents, Lieutenant Colonel Melza answered her superior with her voice. Sazarf took out a box of cigars and showed it to her.

「I try switching hand rolled cigarettes to thin cigars… Do I look more dignified?」

He made a tiny effort to match his position as a Brigadier General. Lieutenant Colonel Melza glanced at him before returning to her work.

「Please get to work, Brigadier General Sir.」

「...... Yes.」

Sazarf returned to his desk work sullenly. At that moment, his partner on his desk informed him of an incoming call. He opened his eyes in surprise, not used to answering the call.

「Erm… H-Hello, this is Sazarf.」

「Solork here, sorry for disturbing you. How's the plans for the simulation battle? Any problems?」

In response to that question, Sazarf shrugged.

「Sigh, I'm proceeding as you suggested… But do we really have to do this? It will be an intense experience, but I think it's too extreme.
」

「That's exactly why I'm leaving the clean up to you, Brigadier General, to avoid unnecessary casualties.」

「I'm happy that you trust me… Sigh, I understand, I will continue with this. The timeline will be submitted by the deadline.」

「I will be waiting. Also— instead of the price, you should pay more attention to the taste of the cigar. Especially before the opposite sex.」

With that casual advice, he hung up. Sazarf's face contorted as he held his partner and looked right into its eyes.

「... Is that guy actually watching us...」

「Sir. Please start working.」

Lieutenant Colonel Melza repeated. Sazarf straightened his back and returned to his work like a rusty machine.

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In another corner of the base, in the mess of one of the basecamp, the hungry soldiers were seated together.

「Alright— dig in!」

At that signal, they reached for the dishes on the table at the same time. After the harsh training, everyone had a great appetite, and one of them was frighteningly serious.

「Chomp chomp...! Munch munch...!」

She bit into the meat and vegetables, and folded a naan before shoving it into her maw, then washed it down with Chaas. The way she ate caused a stir amongst her comrades.

<TL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaas
>

「Oh～ First Lieutenant Nei has a great appetite today too.」

「Don't choke like last time～」

「Don't talk to me! I won't last if I don't eat, that's why I'm shoving food down!」

First Lieutenant Niam Nei responded to the teasing crudely, unwilling to waste time as she chewed on meat. That wasn't enjoying a meal, but just replenishing sustenance. She was refueling her body to avoid dying in the afternoon's training.

「That damn bratty Field Marshal, I asked him to assign me to a relaxed post…! So why do I have to stick around these muscle freaks to train all day? I'm supposed to do brain work!」

She grumbled from time to time as she ate. On the other hand, her comrade was confused by her words.

「Even if you say that～First Lieutenant Nei, objectively speaking, your resume makes you a frontline officer, right? You have good grades in horsemanship and other such subjects, but you didn't get to use them under Mitokazuruku, right?」

「That's right. You say brain work, but what did you do specifically?」

「Do you need to ask? I have to work hard every day to make that old man fall for me! By using my amazing charm and beauty!」

She answered with a bold smile, bread crumbs sticking on her face. Her fellow officers tilted their head with their arms crossed.

「Charm… Beauty...? Sorry, First Lieutenant Nei, you keep using those words. I do not think it means what you think it means.」

「That's it, take your pants off! I will make your knees go weak!」

At the same time, a vermillion-hair figure watched the rowdy scene in the mess through the window of the corridor.

「......」

His partner Sprite notified him of an incoming call. The vermillion-haired general immediately answered.

「... Solvenares Igsem speaking.」

「Yes, Good Afternoon. I don't have any special instructions, just want to see how things are on your side. Is the training progressing smoothly?」

Ikuta checked on his progress. Solvenares looked at his subordinates going through training and affirmed:

「The soldiers' skill and cohesion are improving steadily. Considering the timeline, progress is smooth.」

「You are great at this. I was worried that it would be chaotic if I suddenly expand the recruitment, but it seems that was unnecessary.」

「No problem. The more experienced one is, the better they are at training recruits.」

「Then I will leave it to you— Oh right, how's First Lieutenant Niam Nei doing?」

When Ikuta asked that, he turned to the mess. The woman in question was concentrating on her food.

「She was below average when she was first posted here, but has been improving swiftly. She didn't back down even when surrounded by veterans. From her innate energy and physical ability, she is a suitable person for the frontlines.」

「I see. I thought her previous working environment trampled her talents, and I was right. Aside from her bad habit of seducing her superiors, she has a making of an officer. Because of that incident with Mitokazuruku, my only worry is how her colleagues will treat her.」

Ikuta voiced her concern. The vermillion-haired general looked at the subject in question, then said after considering it.

「About that—」

「— Here, for you.」

A chicken leg was shoved before her. Surprised by the sudden interruption, Niam took it with a frown.

「... I will take it, but why?」

「It's nothing special. I don't dislike people with determination.」

The one seated beside her was a female soldier who seemed to be very experienced. Niam seldom interacted with her, so she eyed that soldier warily.

「Don't be so cold. We are taken in by this unit after General Yorunzaf's retirement. This unit is made up of people who didn't make it as cavalry through normal means— I will be straight, all of us have caused some sort of trouble.」

Ehehe, the female soldier said with a smile. Niam felt a sense of kinship from her, and asked.

「Oh～... So what did you do?」

「I got caught frolicking with my superior officer. That was retarded.
」

「Was he married?」

「Some of them were. I think two out of seven of them were married?」

She said nonchalantly. It was a number that Niam couldn't laugh at.

「Of course you will get caught!」

「I know, right? I thought I will be fine back then, the folly of youth.
」

The female's shoulder shrugged. When they heard that, the people around them gathered around the fresh face.

「What, is this the party to confess the troubles we caused?」

「Me next. It was a full moon that night… The harsh daily training made me yearn for comfort, and I slipped into the room of my lover.
」

A male soldier said proudly. Niam opened her eyes wide when she heard that.

「Huh? You sneaked into the female bunk? It's all over if you get caught. You can just have a tyst outside.」

「No, it's the male bunk...」

「Hmm?」

「But we got caught red handed. Because we got too into it, I couldn't help screaming—」

He went into the details and the soldiers covered their mouths. Lewd stories are popular, but they need to hold back in broad daylight. Piecing together the story from the fragmented details, Niam realized what happened and clapped her hands.

「— Oh, it's that type? You will still get punished for that?」

「Of course. Because the military regulations prohibit heterosexual and homosexual intercourse.」

「Normal soldiers need a lot of effort to secure an empty place. But isn't it easy if the subject is the commander?」

「Hmm～ that depends. You can play all you want in the Commander's Office, but not when you are out on campaign—」

Their comrade concurred curiously, as they gathered around Niam who was speaking. She was confused why her words were so well received, but continued without feeling unpleasant.

The idle chat continued with her in the center. Solvenares glanced at that scene and said:

「— There are many people in the same situation as her, so she fit right in.」

「That's great. This manpower deployment was a little forced, but we won't need to worry now.」

「You don't have to worry about the tasks under my purview. You just focus on your work.」

「I will do just that. That's all I have to say, feel free to contact me about anything.」

When the call ended, the vermillion-haired general walked right to the mess to remind his rowdy subordinates what discipline means.

「Hey, Tritri, are you free?」

When he heard the call from behind, Imperial Chancellor Trisnai Izanma walked on silently in the passageway.

「Oh, you are ignoring me, but that won't work. This is about work. 」

Vackie who expected that reaction went around to the front of the Chancellor. He turned his reptile-like eyes to the girl.

「... Specifically speaking?」

「It's regarding the reform of administration archives. It will be quicker if I show you a current issue, can you follow me?」

Vackie pointed to the archive room behind her. Because she raised a specific issue, Trisnai had to respond as her superior. He silently followed the girl, and Vackie opened an old book before him on the table.

「Heave ho— Take this for example. For the era earlier than the three previous reigning Emperors, the language and grammar of the records are very different. I can't read it at all, can you read it, Tritri? 」

Vackie flipped to a page for him to read. Trisnai browsed through it and answered immediately.

「Of course I can… I remember that at that time, the format of the palace's documents were changed. For people like you who don't

know the formatting of that era, it’s impossible to understand the old documents.」

「I think as much. Aside from you, who else can understand these words?」

「Empress Chamille can understand. There’s also the court librarian managing the administrative documents.」

「Is he still alive?」

The girl got right to the point, but Trisnai didn’t answer immediately. Vackie realized the answer, and leaned back to stare at the ceiling.

「Ah～ so he has passed away, huh～? Right~ since he was appointed as the court librarian, he must be a noble from a long standing clan. If he was in the palace during the coup, the Remeon faction wouldn’t have let him live～」

The girl laid sprawl onto the table, then sat straight up.

「It can’t be helped since he has passed away. I expected that too, but luckily, there are still people who can understand this.」

Vackie grinned from ear to ear as he stared at Trisnai. The Chancellor furrowed his brows.

「... You want me to translate it?」

「More accurately speaking, teach me how to translate. If I can understand the trick, I will do the rest. You just need to help me translate one book. How about it?」

Her gaze was firm as she waited for his answer. When Trisnai remained silent, the girl moaned:

「You don't want to, huh～ If Tritri won't do it, I will have to ask Her Majesty—」

「Out of the question. You can't bother Her Majesty over something so trivial.」

Trisnai cut her off right then. The expected reaction made Vackie look at him again.

「Yes, I concur. So you'll help?」

「... Lend me a pen and paper.」

「Yes, please take these!」

The girl gave him some stationery. After taking the stationery and sitting down, Trisnai said at the figure hiding in a corner of the book shelf.

「Instead of watching from over there, come and assist us, Third Grade Administrative Officer Daimudaritsu. It will be better for more people to understand the original texts if we want to reorganize the records.」

「...!」

「That's what he said, Yoyo. Let's work together.」

Yorga, who was worried about Vackie and watching from the shadows, showed up from behind the bookshelf. Vackie prepared a chair for him happily.

「... Are you trying to butter up to me?」

About an hour after the translation started, Trisnai muttered as he continued writing.

「— Hmm?」

「I ignored you so many times, but you still came to speak with me. I think you received orders from Ikuta Sankrei and are acting this way to achieve a certain goal. It's obviously a waste of time.」

When she heard that, Vackie crossed her arms in deep contemplation. Yorga watched worriedly from the side.

「Hmm～ how do I convey this… Instead of what the goal is— Hmm, Tritri, you are annoying to others, right?」

Her words made Yorga's face cramp, affecting him much more than the subject himself. Vackie continued, spurred on by her natural denseness.

「Let me put it another way. In the palace, there is a consensus accepted unconditionally by everyone— some sort of 『atmosphere』.」

「......」

「However, I have always been bad at dealing with such silent consent.」

The girl said as she leaned back on the chair with a sigh.

「Teaming up with others to hate someone you have no reason to hate, I can't understand something like that. Unconditionally detesting someone your friend hates isn't my style. Even though I think this is a way of expressing friendship.」

「I have ignored you coldly countless times, isn't that a good enough reason?」

「Is that so? I didn't notice~ you see, I'm really dense.」

Vackie said with a grin— then showed a serious face.

「But to think I'm buttering up to you on Ikuta-nii's orders— you're wrong. You're underestimating how calm Ikuta-nii is.」

A tense silence fell, and Yorga held his breath. Vackie looked at the other party with cold eyes and said.

「Ikuta-nii will kill you one day, that is for certain. This isn't a matter of benefit and loss, you have taken too much from him.」

「......」

「So I'm not buttering up to you. I'm doing this out of my own judgement. However— allowing me to act freely might be the intentions of Ikuta-nii.」

The Chancellor's pen didn't stop while they were having this tense conversation. Trisnai's gaze didn't leave the book he was translating, and he answered with his voice.

「... I don't understand. You mean that person allowed you to act against his will?」

「That's right. That's what makes Ikuta-nii amazing. That person— doesn't think the best result can be reached if everything happens according to his will.」

Vackie said proudly. That was a face she made when she sang the praise of her senior disciple.

「Ikuta-nii doesn't like to create schemes to manipulate people to his will. That's the decisive difference between him, you, and Ario Kyakushii. He is magnanimous, and won't decide on good and evil in his own mind. Sometimes, he will accept things outside his values. It must be difficult for you to understand.」

He wrote a little bit slower. After a short pause, Trisnai said:

「... That's—」

「Wait. I don't get this part, why did you translate it this way?」

Vackie cut him off. Trisnai glanced at her face and answered plainly.

「... This is the classical palace word format. Listen well, when the words...」

「Hmm— go on.」

Vackie leaned forth and concentrated. After learning to translate for three hours, the satisfied Vackie accompanied Yorga who had stomach cramps to the infirmary.

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On a certain afternoon, under the clear sky, the Remeon family was gathered in the same place.

「— The weather is great. Sariha, Sushuraf.」

A gentle woman said to her two sons. She was Elisalula Remeon— Terushinha's wife, and the mother of the three brothers. The eldest and second son of the Remeon turned to their mother who made the air turn warm.

「Yes, mother. It's great that the wind is gentle.」 「... But the sun is hot. Mother, stand in my shadow.」

Worried about their mother, Sushuraf shielded her with the shadow from his buff body. Elisalula looked at her grown children happily and suddenly looked behind her.

「Hubby— is Toruru not here yet?」

「Don't worry, Elisa. That child is—」

Before her conversation with Terushinha was over, the sound of horse hooves grew close. It was the youngest son of the Remeon house, the jade-eyed youth, Torway Remeon.

「— Huff, puff...! Sorry I'm late!」

「Toruru!」

Elisa welcomed her youngest son with a bright smile. Sarihasrag said from behind her.

「You're slow, Toruru. Put the horse away and hurry on over.」

「Yes!」

Torway immediately jumped off the horse, and tied it to a post nearby. He tidied his uniform that became untidy on his way here, then ran to his family.

「Fufufu—Toruru is here, so that's five. Just one more person, and the whole family will be here.」

Elisa told them with a faint smile. Her husband and sons didn't miss the deep sorrow behind her calm smile.

「Come, let's go to the last person. She must be eager to see us.」

The sunlight shone through the gaps of the lush garden. Deep inside the garden was a tombstone.

「Good Afternoon, Lucy. Look, everyone's here to see you.」

Elisa squatted down before the tombstone. She wetted a handkerchief with a Water Sprite, then carefully wiped the tombstone.

「Mother, we too—」

Her sons wanted to help, but she shook her head with a faint smile. She lovingly wiped the tombstone and said to it:

「I'm sorry for not visiting for so long. Everyone is really busy these days, it is a hard time. I don't understand the difficult things, but...」

She muttered as she wiped the entire tombstone, then turned to her sons behind with a smile.

「Come and give your greetings.」

The three brothers walked forth on their mother's urging. The three of them stood shoulder to shoulder before the tombstone, and the eldest spoke first.

「This is Sarihasrag. It's been a while, teacher Lucy.」

「Sushuraf here. Teacher, pardon my tardy greetings.」

They saluted after saying that. Torway mimicked his brothers' actions, but couldn't speak smoothly.

「... T-Teacher...」

He tried to say something, but his hoarse voice came out in meaningless spurts. Sarihasrag patted the youth's trembling shoulder.

「Hey, Toruru— teacher doesn't like seeing people cry.」

「—Yes.」

Torway stood tall with gritted teeth. Sariha turned his gaze back to the tombstone, then snorted.

「But she won't go easy despite that— Teacher, he is the same as usual, but he got promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. That cry baby outranked Sushuraf and me.」

He sighed, half of it was sarcasm, the other half was worry.

「To be honest— I wish the teacher was around during times like this… You are proficient in teaching others the harshness of the world. You made me cry a lot of times, and that is something this guy will need from now on.」

Sariha said with a serious face, then grinned.

「I will stop my whining here. Anyway, don't worry. We remember the lessons we learned from you, or rather, we can't forget it. Compared to the number of times Dad hit us, you have slapped us many more times.」

Sariha said with an easy face. Shortly after, Sushuraf said.

「Teacher, I have learned to walk on my own path… That's the only improvement I have made. However, I won't regress back to how I was. Never again.」

Sushuraf vowed clearly. Sariha smiled awkwardly.

「What's that, Sushuraf. Your words are as vague as ever.」

「No… This is enough. Big Bro has already said what I wanted to.」

Sushuraf said with his lips curled. The two brothers then turned to their youngest brother.

「Toruru, what about you?」

「... I...」

Torway was silent. A hand was placed on his shoulder from behind.

「Our family has always had two mothers.」

Elisa said softly, her slender fingers caressing her son’s hair.

「I think all of you are cute, and aren't good at scolding any of you. Lucy has always taken on the stern role of nurturing children… I’m really sly. I dote on you, and you stick to me, so I’m the only one who got the good part of being a mother.」

「......」

「I have always been receiving the grace of Lucy. You supported Tel on the battlefield, and guided the children. Do you know how much I admire you?」

Elisa said and stood before the tombstone again. She tightly embraced the tombstone that bore the symbol of the Remeon, a Wind Gun.

「But— why did you have to go, Lucy? I haven’t repaid you yet. All the things you have done for me, I have not...」

Tears rolled down her cheeks and fell onto the tombstone. Torway said quietly as he watched his sobbing mother.

「— Teacher. Even now, I’m still not good at shooting living things.」

He stopped thinking about what to say, and said what he felt directly.

「However, I won’t be ashamed of myself anymore. Even someone like me— No, because of who I am, I have comrades who need me.」

That was the pride supporting him, the right way to live that the youth had arrived at.

「I will continue to stand on the battlefield as a coward, and stay afraid of killing others or dying to others… Because this is a precious feeling that I can't forget.」

His two brothers listened with serious faces, the back of their youngest brother was no longer fragile.

「That's why, I will strive for it— a world where people don't have to be heroes. A future where anyone can be a coward. Because that must be what teacher wishes for too.」

Torway concluded and looked right at the tombstone. A while later, his father walked to his side.

「The world, huh? —I never thought the day will come when I will hear that from you.」

「Father...」

Terushinha gently touched the back of his wife who was hugging the tombstone, and said to his long time adjutant.

「Did you hear that, Lucika? As you can see, the children have left our hands… It's lonely and vexing, but as parents, we have to accept the time when our children leave the nest.」

The days the children were born flashed across his mind, and the jade-eyed General told her in awe:

「The children who learned from you are pioneering a path to the future, that's the greatest thing you left to us— Lucika Kursk, the knight who stayed with our Remeon family. Thank you for watching us, and being a part of our lives—」

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A few weeks later. The field exercise Sazarf planned on Ikuta's orders was being carried out by two brigades.

「— Halt! Form up and roll call!」

The soldiers in file formation stopped and caught their breath. They resisted the urge to sit down, then chatted with their comrades while avoiding the eyes of their superiors.

「Phew, we are finally here...」

「It's three days, but the distance is rather far. Anyone dropped out?」

The roll call was done quickly, confirming that no one dropped out. The soldiers were relieved, then turned their eyes to the scene before them.

「But what is the Field Marshal planning by bring all of us here?」

Within their field of vision was a structure that was 800m wide and 30m tall. From the air, it had the shape of a hexagon covered in thick walls. The walls had innumerable signs of damage from bullets and bombardment, which meant it had been used in a live battle not long ago.

「That's right. This is the Balshiha Fortress— one of the top defensive strongholds in the Empire. It is old, but it is a facility that can still be used.」

「So you're saying we will have a training exercise here or something?」

「No, if the enemy gets this far, then the war was as good as lost. Even if we want to conduct a siege exercise, a more practical place should be somewhere further to the east.」

「Are we going to train with the facilities to get used to a siege battle? If that is so, then we have too many people...」

One soldier said as he looked around. The two brigades of ten thousand Imperial soldiers surrounded the fortress. This was a large fortress, but too small for all the soldiers. First of all, if that was the intention, then the advance party would have moved in already.

「And we have huge cannons around the fortress. Is that the new weapon, Blast Cannons? I thought it was equipment for field battles, so they will be set up in the fortress?」

This intrigued the soldiers once more, a new weapon most of them weren't familiar with. How would the exercise be carried out? They thought as they waited for the next instructions.

「— Okay, the soldiers are in position. It is time, Brigadier General Sazarf.」

On the other hand, at the same time, in a tent set up at a corner of the camp. Sazarf who was listening to the dark-haired youth scratched his head with a troubled face.

「I don't know how many times I have asked this… but are we really doing this?」

「It's too cold to not do anything and go back now. We brought so many people over.」

「That's right, but we can do this another way...」

After traveling all the way to the site of the exercise, Sazarf was still wavering about executing the 'upcoming actions'. Ikuta shrugged.

「I won't say there isn't any other way. But we are intentionally choosing such an extreme method. With the final battle looming, the

Imperial Army has to change its mindset. From the top ranking officers to the footsoldiers, we have to revolutionize our common sense of warfare. That's why we are having this exercise.」

「... In short, you have no intentions of cutting the exercise?」

Sigh, the young Brigadier General sighed deeply. Ikuta smiled nefariously to make him loosen his tense shoulders.

「Don't worry, you won't have any superior officer accusing you of going too far. Because I'm the Field Marshal now.」

「I might not need to worry about my superior blaming me, but I have an adjutant who is serious about everything. Will you get scolded together with me at the crucial moment?」

「Hmm… Can I take this as an invitation to 3P?」

「Hahaha, can I punch you now?」

They bickered as usual, and the dark-haired youth turned his gaze to Kusu on the table.

「Well then, it's about time to begin. Inform all units through the communication Sprites—」

「— Ikuta here. Matthew, can you hear me?」

When he received the notification from his partner Wind Sprite Tu, the pudgy youth realized that it was time.

「Yes, I can hear you… Are we going to begin?」

「Yes, we are aiming to start in ten minutes. Can you brief the troops before it starts?」

「Alright, I know… However, I’m not a cunning linguist like you, so don’t expect too much.」

Matthew ended the call with that reminder, then gave instruction to the officers under him, and said to the soldiers around him.

「All units, attention!— Listen up! I have something to tell you before the exercise starts!」

He raised his voice so he could reach the units behind. In the distance, the other officers were yelling like him. The youth didn’t lower his volume and continued:

「Many of you must be thinking. Even if the final battle with Kioka is looming, the Empire has plenty of excellent fortresses, like Fortress Balshiha before you. And that we won’t lose in a defensive siege battle—」

「— We can stubbornly defend the fortress all over the nation, and propose a ceasefire when the enemy is exhausted. Many people predicted that the battle with Kioka would proceed in such a way. In fact, many past wars went down this exact way—」

On the other side of the Fortress, Torway was giving the same briefing to his men. Confused by their superior’s intention, the soldiers listened closely.

「— However, the way that wars are fought have changed drastically. New weapons, new infantry units, new tactics— the common sense of the war of the past cannot be applied to the new way of war.」

「And so, we need to understand this before the final battle—」

Sarihasrag and Sushuraf who were tagging along for the exercise also explained to their troops, and thought about what the future would entail.

「— The exercise today will show this. So just watch what is going to happen. It might be intense, but this is a bitter medicine we need.」

When Ikuta reached this point, Kusu in his arms, who had kept the communication channel open, yelled loudly.

「— Start the bombardment!」

The next instant, the sounds of explosion overlapped with each other, and permeated the ears of the troops.

「—What—!」

The soldiers shrinked their bodies in fear from the loud explosion, and opened their eyes in shock. The artillery batteries near them were covered in smoke, and the payload fired from the muzzles onto the fortress.

「H-Hey! It's a bombardment?」「Impossible! It's firing at our fortress!?」

「The sound is deep…! The soundwave is making my stomach heavy!」「L-Look! That's—」

Loud explosions kept ranging out. The impact from the munition shattered the stone walls. Half the Blast Cannons hit the wall directly, while the other half aimed for the interior by firing at an arc. Damage to the inside and outside was progressing at the same terrifying rate.

「T-The outer walls of the fortress...!」

「A hole had been blasted?」「Too quick! With just that...!」

Less than three minutes after the bombardment, the outer walls on the east side crumbled. This was the result of the focus fire weakening the foundation so much that it couldn't hold its own weight. This was impossible for the Wind Cannons in the past— but the power of the Blast Cannons refuted this common sense.

「Ahhhh...!」「It can't be, there are holes everywhere in an instant...!」

「The base of the tower is blown away...」「Uwah—! I-It collapsed! 」

The structures inside were more fragile than the fortress wall. The central tower, that served as the command post of the fortress, fell over when its last support took a devastating direct hit. The shells continue to fall, the fortress that was standing tall just moments ago was quickly losing its shape—

「— Stop the shelling!」

On the instructions of the dark-haired youth, the shelling finally stopped.

「I want everyone to see with your own eyes— this is how a war looks like now.」

On the Field Marshal's urging, the soldiers stared wordlessly at the scene before them— Ruins and debris with dust floating in the air… A fortress was standing there ten minutes ago. However, that memory had been snatched away by the intense bombardment.

「I want to say this clearly— when facing Blast Cannons, all the existing fortresses and walls are meaningless. They will be turn into this terrible state under focus artillery fire.」

Ikuta continued showing the stiff soldiers basking in this merciless truth. After being dazed for a short moment, they felt a feeling of uneasiness as if they lost their footing… The dark-haired youth wasn't trying to destroy the fortress, but the Imperial soldiers' over reliance on the fortress— and the myth they were safe.

「Anyway, a defensive battle depending on a fortress will not be possible in the future. Going into the defensive is equivalent to defeat. Hence— the upcoming war will literally be the final battle. There can only be either victory or defeat.」

The soldiers held their breath. They realized that the upcoming battle would literally decide the survival of the country.

「And it should be clear that because we started late in the development and manufacture of Blast Cannons, Kioka has more of them than us. We have to fight with this fact in mind— and adopt completely different ideas. To accomplish this, I organized this exercise to let everyone understand the question we are facing.」

A heavy silence loomed over the troops. Ikuta treated this situation to be only natural and nodded.

「And of course, I don't plan to end this by just showing this result— this is just half the exercise. All units, proceed to the next destination. This is just the beginning.」

「... He showed us such a scene. What should we do...」

The troops in file formation mumbled. Their feet were as heavy as lead. They left the collapsed fortress, but what they saw earlier was still branded onto their mind.

「... If the fortresses are pointless, then what should we use for weapons...? And the enemy has more Blast Cannons too...?」

Not everyone was talking, but they all felt the same way. Deployed to a hopeless war— this was the greatest fear for the troops on the frontlines.

「... I thought Blast Cannons were just bigger Wind Cannons, but it's so powerful… Do we stand a chance against such an opponent...?」

The more they thought about it, the more formidable the Kioka army seemed to be. No one told them to, but they were already racking their brains on how to deal with that scene.

「...Field Marshal Sir. As we expected, the soldiers are greatly shaken.」

Sazarf muttered with a glance at the troops. He was riding in tandem with Ikuta behind him, and rode in the center of the formation. The dark-haired youth nodded nonchalantly.

「This is only natural since they witnessed that scene. I will be troubled if they didn't get shocked.」

「That might be so… Informing them of the new facts is all good, but what are you going to do about the low morale? Not many people can keep their fighting spirits after witnessing that scene.」

「It's fine, this is inevitable. If they can't grasp the power of the Blast Cannons now, they will go through what happened today during live battle. Think of this as a right of passage to be done as soon as possible. Instead of the brute courage before knowing the truth, I prefer the timidness after learning the facts.」

He said without any doubts. Be it as a Scientist or as a soldier, the youth's attitude remained unchanged.

「The time spent on traveling is also a buffer for them to accept the situation in their own way. The troops must be thinking what they

need to do to win, and whether it is possible to prevail— that's a good way of thinking for soldiers.」

Sazarf groaned. Ikuta behind him laughed softly.

「Our job is to guide their thoughts in the right direction. And give them a push, so they can take the right steps towards victory. If we succeed, then their fighting spirit and morale will naturally follow.」

They crossed a large hill while they spoke, and could see the next destination. The youth looked right at their target and said.

「However— the last step is a little tough.」

Tens of minutes later. The troops followed the officers orders and halted.

「... We are stopping here?」

They surveyed their surroundings. The unit formed up with their comrades that arrived earlier on the gentle slope.

「This is the middle of the hilly terrain. What's going to happen this time...?」

Torway who was mounted on the horse approached the soldiers that were in a stir.

「We will conduct the second half of the exercise here. Everyone, look over there.」

He pointed to a drainage basin at the bottom of the hill. The troops tilted their head puzzledly as they watched.

「What's that? There are strange marks on the ground...」 「Are there several ditches dug in a circular shape… Huh?」

The long ditches formed concentrated circles when seen from above, looking like makeshift moats. After seeing the huge fortress, this seems very fragile.

「That is a substitute for a fortress— we will now bombard that place like we did earlier.」

What the jade-eyed youth said confused the troops further— How do they use that? They just saw a sturdy stone fortress crumble before them. If that happens to a fortress, how could these large trenches survive the bombardment?

「However, unlike the unmanned fortress, there will be people garrisoned inside… including the Field Marshal.」

「Huh—?」

His next line made the troops doubt their ears. After that, some of their comrades went down the hill right before their eyes. The soldiers watched their backs in shock.

「Wait, huh? Are they serious...?」 「L-Look, so many of them are going into the trenches...」

The soldiers walked into the trenches that would be bombarded later, and a dark-haired youth was amongst them.

「— It's slippery, please watch your steps.」

「Yes, I'm fine.」

Ikuta walked down the slope and entered the trenches with his escorts. It was about two metres deep, and an adult's head wouldn't be exposed even when standing.

The officers signalled with their eyes, and the soldiers surrounded the youth. They formed a meat shield with their bodies— in case of

anything, this was the last line of defence for the incoming bombardment.

「Don’t worry. We will protect you with our lives.」

「I’m not worried… Sorry for forcing you guys to join me.」

Ikuta apologized. The officer snorted softly.

「Field Marshal Sir, even if you say so— I don’t think you have to apologize to someone twenty years older than you.」

When he said that, the men around them smiled in agreement. Letting their senior officer or young people risk their lives alone was unimaginable for their common sense. Realizing what they mean, Ikuta smiled wryly.

「... Yes, I misspoke. Allow me to correct myself— thank you for joining me.」

The youth said gratefully, and took out his partner from his pouch.

「Incoming call from Ikuta.」

「......」

His partner notified him of a call. Matthew realized that it was finally time, and picked up the call with a stiff voice.

「... This is Major Matthew.」

「Ikuta Here. The preparations in the trenches are done, we are ready any time.」

In contrast, the voice from the other side was very relaxed. The pudgy youth wasn’t in the mood to blindly agree and end the call, then said:

「Hey, don't be so casual about it… You know what will happen if I make a mistake?」

「Of course I know. That's why I'm leaving it to you.」

Ikuta continued in a nonchalant tone.

「In all the battles so far, haven't we entrusted our lives to each other plenty of times? It's the same this time too.」

「......」

「Hey Matthew, are your hands still trembling?」

When he heard that, a piece of memory revived in Matthew's mind… At the start of the Northern Unrest, the conversation they had before engaging the enemy assaulting their camp. The fairy tale of the courageous general and the timid general. The youth thought about that as he stared at his hands.

「... No, they are not.」

「That's what I thought— Well then, I leave the rest to you.」

His voice was relaxed until the end. The dark-haired youth hinted that he wasn't worried, and to get it over quickly. Matthew sighed deeply.

「Don't be so relaxed about it, really...!」

When he raised his head while grumbling, a subordinate rushed to him. He reported with a similarly tensed face.

「M-Major Matthew. The Blast Cannons have been deployed, but...
」

「Got it, I'm going over to inspect.」

The youth walked forth with a nod. He approached the cannons in neat formation, then checked the direction and angle of the muzzle, the gauge of the Dynamic Air and other details. He couldn't afford to be negligent, but he also used that as an excuse to back down. He had the trust of Ikuta Solork, who entrusted this task to him— This fact supported him strongly, and boosted Matthew Tetzirich's confidence.

「...... Good, no problem.」

After finishing his inspection, the slightly plump youth confirmed. He was sure he had done everything he should do, and anything more would just be a waste of time. He shouted firmly.

「Start the bombardment!」

He ordered without hesitation— loud explosions rang out once more.

「Uwahhh!」 「T-They really are firing!」

「Stop! Stahp!」 「Friendlies, there're friendlies in there—!」

When the bombardment began, the troops turned hysterical. That was only natural— their comrades could only take cover in the trenches dug into the ground. Even a fortress fell to the Blast Cannons, so what could this accomplish?

Their screams weren't conveyed to their allies, and the bombardment continued for a long time. Dust hung in the air where the shells found their mark, and drifted to the noses of the soldiers watching. Afraid of smelling blood in the air, they unconsciously stopped their breathing.

「... The bombardment is over, right?」

A few minutes after the screaming started, the trenches down hill was completely obscured by the dust cloud. No one could say anything, and the soldiers were too afraid to imagine the terrible state behind the dust clouds. The troops averted their gazes.

「Hey, don't daze off. Look with your eyes wide open.」

A stern voice admonished them. Sarihasrag shouted at his men, telling them to look ahead.

「Ah—」

They could see things moving. A lot of figures climbed out of the trenches that had been blown out of shape, and were walking in the dust. Shortly after, their very healthy allies appeared before them, covered in mud.

「T-They are alive. More of them are coming out—」 「The shelling is so intense, but they...!」

The troops couldn't hide their shock from this unexpected result. When they saw the youth with a walking stick amongst them, their surprise turned into exhilaration.

「Look! The Field Marshal is safe!」

Their eyes were focused on the survivors. Feeling the eyes of everyone on him, Ikuta slowly said.

「— As you can all see, this is our defence strategy against the Blast Cannons.」

He pointed to the trenches behind him and said. He went in there personally and went through the intense bombardment. The result surprised most of the soldiers, and Ikuta explained to the curious troops.

「Compared to the explosion itself, the terrifying thing about Blast Cannons are the shrapnels flying from the impact. Aside from the shards contained in the payload, the destroyed building will become part of the shrapnels too. The fortress walls shielding us will become a weapon because of the Blast Cannons.

The impact that sends the shrapnels flying in all directions including upwards— however, it won't fly downwards.」

Ikuta pointed to the ground. The soldiers looked at their feet on cue.

「So the best answer to escape from the explosion is to dig a deep but narrow trench and hide inside. That will stop the debris from the fortress from causing secondary damages. Even if all the fortresses in the Empire can't protect us, our shield is right by our feet.」

The youth said with a bold smile as he took a shovel from a soldier beside him.

「The way to fight the Blast Cannons in a field battle, is to dig trenches. In the next battle, compared to Wind Guns and crossbows, you will need your shovels more. The trenches being uncomfortable will still be a problem though.」

He said as he dusted off his cape and uniform. The eyes of the soldiers returned to life when they saw his figure. The Field Marshal personally proved the effectiveness of the trenches. For the troops facing the Blast Cannons in the future, he was a real glimmer of hope.

「Anyway, this will be your new shield. You will need to get used to making them— everyone have your shovel ready?」

When they heard the Field Marshal's words, the soldiers all took out their shovels. And then, they dug.

「— Casualty report! The bombardment caused 12 light casualties, all of them are sprains and bruises! No serious casualties or death! And of course, the Field Marshal is also safe!」

At the same time, Matthew, the commander of the Blast Cannons, fell on his knees when he received that report.

「— Phew, we did it...」

He exhaled the air in his lungs along with his voice. His tension was gone, which made him a little dizzy. His subordinate supported him with his hand and complimented him.

「Congratulations, Major… This is a scary exercise. The showcase of the trenches' defences aside, I never thought the Field Marshal will go in personally...」

「I also objected, but he refused to back down. He insisted on leaving things to me, and told me not to worry...」

Matthew stood up with the help of his subordinate, then sighed deeply— the trenches might be effective against bombardment, but that didn't mean staying in them was completely safe. They could only avoid the wide range splash damage from the explosion, but a direct hit into the trench will definitely kill the soldiers.

And that was why Matthew had to adjust the bombardment to prevent that from happening. Ikuta's safety was a given, and considering the psychological effect on the troops, they couldn't afford any serious casualties or death in this exercise. Opening fire on allies without causing any serious damage— he accomplished Ikuta's request splendidly.

「We did a lot of experiments beforehand, and got used to handling Blast Cannons, so this isn't an impossible mission… But just the thought of shelling allies is...」

The pudgy youth grumbled as he watched Ikuta give a speech to the troops. *I won't do this again*
— he might be thinking that, but he was honestly proud to have answered the youth's expectations.

Chapter 2: The Wavering Heroes

The place was the ocean to the south of Kioka. Booms from explosions echoed in the naval harbour nearby.

「— Fire!」

Shells were shot out from the side of the ships, splashing tall pillars of water on the sea. The sailors observing the effectiveness of the barrage yelled.

「Well done— the accuracy is good!」 「Next is the starboard side! Open the gunports!」

When the ships turned towards the wind, the gunports on the other side of the ships opened. They were conducting combat training to prepare against enemy vessels. The prisoners of wars successfully returned home, and the morale of the Kioka Fourth Fleet was high as they trained to take revenge for their defeat in Port Nemong.

「Oh, the ocean is wonderful...! The seabreeze feels great!」

「It's great to be back. The thought of idling in the Empire until we die is...」

The sailors shuddered at that thought. His comrade beside him patted his back.

「That will happen if we lose next time. They won't make the same mistake.」

「Y-Yes, I know— We are getting used to using the Blast Cannons on the ship too. We will sink those damn Imperial Pirates next time!」

That sailor raised his voice to motivate himself. He suddenly turned behind, but the woman who was always watching them from the bridge wasn't there.

「But— the Great Mother isn't here today.」

「She has the day off. And surprisingly, Commander Greg has the day off too.」

「Oh～...?」

The two of them love the sea more than the land, so it's rare for them to have off days at the same time. Something felt a bit off for them, but for the sake of their beloved Great Mother, they focused on their training.

＊

At the same time, on a land far from the ocean and the sailors, the two subjects in question were meeting up in the streets.

「Good Morning, Greg. Did you wait long?」

「No, I arrived just ten minutes ago.」

In front of the fountain where they were meeting up for a date, Greg stood with his back straight. His posture made it look like a rod was stuck down his spine, making it obvious he was a soldier. His buff body, six feet height and split mouth were very effective in clearing the crowds— however, the 「Great Mother of White Wings」 didn't mind. She approached him with a glamorous smile.

「It's been a while since I last saw you in casual wear. Your taste is still as good as ever.」

「Thank you, because my parents took care to teach me.」

He said as he straightened his tie. His scars made it difficult to see properly, but Greg had a manly face. He was wearing a three piece suit, his pants didn't have any creases, and his leather shoes were as shiny as a mirror. Including his choice of accessories like a pocket watch, he stood at the forefront of fashion even in the Capital Norandot.

「However, it's been a while since I tormented the tailors because of my large physique. I just need a set of military uniforms to go anywhere. It's convenient, but—」

Greg stopped and looked at the woman before him.

「— But that won't do today. If I have to match you on land, then I have to put in some effort to dress up.」

「Fufu. How about it?」

She turned around and asked, her snow white dress fluttering in the air. Matched with her khaki shirt, Elulufay gave an impression of innocence completely different from the usual her. Greg narrowed his eyes and commented:



「... You look like you're shining. I'm not exaggerating.」

「Oh, how smooth.」

Surprised by that reaction, Elulufay blushed a little and turned around.

「Let's start then— Can I leave the place to visit to you?」

「I can't promise that you will definitely enjoy yourself, but if you don't mind, please accompany me.」

Greg led the way and Elulufay followed with a smile. Their day off started peacefully.

They went to a couple of tourist spots, then entered a teahouse when they got a little hungry, and sat opposite each other.

「— It might be a bit late to say this, but why a date?」

Elulufay suddenly asked. Greg took a sip of tea, then snorted.

「Who knows… I don't understand what that brat is thinking. There is no way he can know that we will keep this promise on a whim.」

He muttered and put down the teacup. They were spending a rare day off like this because of the promise they made with Ikuta at the end of their escape from the Empire. His condition was for the two of them to go out on a date, before allowing the 「Great Mother of White Wings」 to go back to Kioka— it wasn't clear how serious he was, but that was what the dark-haired youth said. Thinking back on what the scene that day looked like made Elulufay laugh softly.

「Yes. However, I don't want to forget it either… Since we first met, he kept saying weird things to me. I didn't understand back then, but I have been thinking about it recently.」

She said as she added a spoon of sugar into the steaming tea. She slowly stirred the amber liquid, then continued:

「The thing about how it's the commander's job to sell the lives of the troops for a high price…? I always do my best to protect the children in the fleet, but depending on the perspective, he has a point.」

「You jest. None of us think the Great Mother is doing business with our lives.」

Greg refuted it immediately. The Great Mother nodded with a smile.

「That's right, you'll say that. However— it's unavoidable for there to be deaths in any war.」

Elulufay sighed. Seeing the deep sorrow in her eyes, the man said sharply.

「Do you have doubts about continuing as a soldier?」

「......」

「Please be frank and be straight with me. This concerns the future of all of us.」

Greg urged further and stared at her. Facing his serious eyes, Elulufay looked up at the ceiling of the teahouse.

「The Fourth Kioka Fleet— is the home Ario prepared for us in this country. We all drifted here after experiencing painful things, and hung on to it desperately… Because if we lose this home, we won't have anywhere to go.」

「......」

「But recently, I can't help thinking— will this be so in the future too? Can we only live as soldiers in Kioka, and be recognized as citizens through risking our lives in dangerous battles…? If that is so, is it really fine for us to accept this?」

She shared the struggles in her heart— for the sailors born in fallen nations, the Fourth Fleet was one of the few places they could stay in Kioka. However— that meant they had nowhere else to go. Being a Kioka citizen was equivalent to being a sailor to them.

「I don't hate being in the military. I'm treated extremely well here, and I get a sense of joy and accomplishment by using my talents to their fullest. But… But...」

Elulufay thought about her subordinates who died during their long imprisonment and their escape. The fleet managed to return, but not all of them survived. Some fell sick during their imprisonment, some didn't recover from their wounds during the naval battle, and died in a foreign land. She still remembers all of their names.

「... No matter how hard I work in my position, or love them as a mother… the children I want to protect, who admire me as a mother will die whenever war breaks out...!」

The woman cried in pain— that was her contradiction. She called her subordinates her children and gave them her love. But that contradicts her actions of sending them to their deaths. The same thing will keep repeating. The Great Mother of White Wings's heart was finally creaking.

「Sorry for losing my composure here… But I can't help thinking whether I made the wrong choice in the first place? Instead of calling me mother and admiring me, aren't there more things that they can do—?」

Elulufay told him her struggles with clenched fists. Greg looked at her for a moment— then raised the corners of his lips.

「... I'm glad.」

「— Huh?」

「You're finally discussing this with me, and not just coaxing me like a kid… You are finally relying on me as a person.」

Elulufay opened her eyes wide when she heard this unexpected answer. Greg returned to the topic with a serious face.

「I always wanted to be a person like this. With how tall and buff I am, I don't want to just be a kid protected by you… the others must be thinking the same thing. Speaking of kids, after they got through the age of wanting to be spoiled, they will want to support their parents.」

After hearing his sincere feelings, the Great Mother of White Wings had no words. Greg quietly approached her struggling soul, and shielded her from the cold storm with his huge body.

「Great Mother— No, Lady Elulufay. You need to understand your feelings first. What do you want to do? How will you make arrangements for the crew? If your thoughts aren't clear, then we can't start. This is a signpost for this voyage, and we will capsize if we paddle without thinking.」

「...Greg...」

After receiving a sincere warning, Elulufay closed her eyes and thought carefully. In the shop that didn't have many customers after the noon rush hour, silence fell— she opened her eyes a while later.

「... I haven't given it enough thought to make a decision. If possible, I want an opinion from a third party. A person who could calmly assess our position from an entirely different perspective...」

At this moment, an old memory surfaced in Elulufay's mind. The date after returning home was a request made to Greg, not her. He made a different request to her before that.

「...Who is that youth asking me to meet?」

＊

「—*Yah**
, please take care of the deficit that way. That base is slightly overstaffed, so it's a good time to reorganize. Do pay attention to—
」

In the Kioka army base near Capital Norandot. In a room on the floor above, a white-haired officer was dealing with his duties together with a few aides.

They were communicating with colleagues, but the person they were speaking with wasn't present. Just like Ikuta, they were using the unlocked communication function of the Sprites. For the person who felt one body wasn't enough, this improved the efficiency of his work dramatically, a gift right to his liking. However—

「Jean, take a break. I will take the next call.」

「*Mum**
? No, but—」

Seeing that he just ended his call, Jean's adjutant Miara cut in sharply. Jean turned her down on reflex, but his words were stopped by her serious eyes. A few seconds of silence later, he handed his partner Luna over in resignation.

「*...Yah*.*
I understand, I will leave this to you.」

「—! Thank you!」

Miara couldn't hide her glee— since that day when she confessed, her actions towards Jean had changed a little. She no longer just watched on helplessly, and would take the initiative to lighten her burden.

「Hello, this is the headquarters.」 「I understand. Our colleague will meet you on site tomorrow.」

「Please relay that to the supply unit.」 「Regarding the change in equipment, we are currently researching—」

The other officers in the room were assigned there by Miara for that goal. If Jean wants to, he could take care of all communications himself and finish a large amount of work. Not letting him do so was Miara's current goal.

… Aside from jobs that could only be done by him, the tasks that could be finished by others would be kept away from him. She refused to back down on this, even if Jean hates it.

「Oh— your workplace has gotten lively.」

Someone walked into their office. The man was wearing a dark blue suit and had a perfect smile on his face. The soldiers in the office all stood up and saluted.

「Sir Kyakushii? What brings you to our base? If you need something from us, you can just contact us through the Sprites.」

「I will do that for normal affairs. But sometimes, there are things that I rather do in person.」

「You mean—」

Jean had a premonition and straightened his back. Ario said to him with a fearsome smile.

「This will be made public at a later date, but we have decided on the commander-in-chief for the coming final battle with the Empire— You will be in charge, Major General Jean Arkinex. Congratulations.」

He offered his hand for a handshake. When they heard that, the officers came over.

「— Is that true?」 「Amazing! Isn't that a huge step up? Major General!」

The commander-in-chief for the looming final battle would definitely be recorded in the history books. Jean shook the hand with a stiff face, and his adopted father maintained his smile and continued.

「You might feel dissatisfied with your rank staying at Major General, however— a nation with proper rules can't make reckless manpower deployment. I seek your understanding in this.」



He subtly snide the current state of the Empire. Jean holding the rank of a Major General was out of the norm, but Ikuta Solork getting appointed as Field Marshal in his twenties was clear tyranny. His talent couldn’t be refuted, but his appointment was a result of numerous abnormal situations piling on top of each other. But Jean had no intention of comparing Ikuta’s situation with his—

「However, when you achieve victory in the final battle, then this won’t be a reckless manpower assignment.」

With that as the premise, the Prime Minister hinted that his son would rise even higher in the future. He had no doubts that he and his son would stand at the top of the political and military scene. Surprised by his adoptive father’s confidence, Jean silently saluted.

「... I will take on the heavy role of leading Kioka to victory.」

「Yes, do your best— but you don’t look too happy?」

「No, that’s not true… I’m just nervous because of the heavy responsibility.」

「I see, that can’t be helped. You have the fate of the nation on your shoulders at just 25 to 26 years old. But I think this is the most adequate manpower assignment.」

「... It’s an honour.」

「Field Marshal Ikuta Solork’s Imperial army is formidable, but we have nothing to fear if the 『Insomniac Brilliant General』 put his all into battle. While he was satisfied with sleep, you continue thinking for the nation’s future without rest. This will be the difference that decides the result of this war.」

Ario grabbed Jean’s shoulders with both hands, then gave one final push with his perfect smile still on his face.

「So— you will work harder than ever, right?」

When he heard that— the white-haired officer experienced a flashback.

「— Your insomniac nature has many hidden dangers.」

After passing the trial, they entered the underground facility. While Ikuta and Kusu were speaking in private, Jean also entered a guest room to speak with his partner installed in a large body.

「Shortening sleeping time is one of the traits implemented by the mutation stimulant from the past. However— you have normalized it in your case. Not sleeping for several years is obviously not the standard.」

The white-haired officer digested the content and asked quietly.

「Can you make it clear? Luna… what will happen to me?」

「You won't show any abnormalities swiftly tomorrow. Before coming here, I did a health scan for you, and didn't detect any pressing symptoms. However— looking at the long term, it's obvious there would be repercussions. You will age early, have lowered immunity— leading to a shortened lifespan.」

When he heard that conclusion, Jean twisted the corners of his lips and looked up into the sky.

「... So that's the price of doing away with sleep?」

「That's right. Even in the distant past, sleep is a mandatory element for a long life. Even with the technology of that era, humans can't avoid sleeping. Sleep deprivation for a short period is no problem, but if that state persists for a long time, the fatigue will gradually

build up in their brains. The fatigue will result in irreversible aging, and become visible on your body—」

Luna sincerely told him the truth without any frills. Jean nodded and asked:

「... If I want to extend my lifespan, what can I do?」

「There is no other way but sleeping. Stop overusing your brain and set aside time for sleep. If you do that, you can suppress the progress of aging.」

The simple answer made the youth lower his head with gritted teeth.

「... I already forgot how to sleep.」

「I know. As you suspected, your insomniac nature is closely related to your psychological state. In extreme terms— the one stopping you from sleeping is yourself, Jean.」

「......」

「... I can prescribe medicine to promote sleep for you. However, if you refuse to sleep, you can't change your body's nature. Please consider this carefully. Do you really wish to live a life that shortens your lifespan—?」

「—? What's wrong, Jean.」

Ario, who was confused by the silence, asked. Jean snapped back to reality and fudged things over with a smile.

「... No, it's nothing. Don't worry Sir, I will definitely answer your expectations.」

Jean didn't think his adoptive father would accept any other answer. The Prime Minister deepened his smile and embraced him.

「I'm proud of you, my son— go forth boldly, hesitating doesn't suit the reputation of our hero.」

He patted Jean's shoulder and backed away. Ario then left the room after finishing what he came to do. Unable to stand by idly, Miara took the youth's hand and rushed into the break room next door.

「...Jean...!」

「......」

「Is this really fine? Are you planning to do what Sir Kyakushii said, and work as hard as you used to— no, to work even harder than before for the upcoming final battle?」

Miara asked him directly. In response to her firm question, Jean said in a quiet voice.

「... I tried to sleep before.」

「— Huh—?」

「I mean that literally. Last night— I took the medicine I got from that place, and tried lying down on a bed.」

The Insomniac Brilliant General confessed, and Miara realized with bated breath just how much his heart was shakened after the Three Nation Conference.

「I tried for several hours, but I only dozed off a little and couldn't sleep… But I dreamed. It's about my family. My father, mother and sister stared at me from the side of the bed without saying anything, with gloomy grudgeful eyes...」

Miara felt a chill down her back imagining that scene. The youth continued with his head hung low.

「Is my goal correct? Is Sir Kyakushii's ideal right? I can't be certain now. However— that didn't matter, maybe I can't be forgiven. Maybe I shouldn't hold expectations that I can rest and sleep, or live as long as normal people.」

「—!」

That's not it.
Miara was about to shout when Jean noticed a presence at the entrance. The soldier quickly appeared, and looked relieved after seeing Jean.

「So you are here, Major General Arkinex. You have a few letters, one of them is from that girl.」

The soldier gave a stack of envelopes to Jean and left. The youth opened one of the envelopes with trembling hands and perused the letter… This was her 32nd letter, and her handwriting had gotten much better compared to when she first started.

「...Kasha...」

He quietly read out that name. After staring at the letter with a long silence, Jean sat before a desk and wrote a reply as the teary eyed Miara watched on.

「... Ughh...」

Starting with the season greetings, he responded to the girl's report and got into the main topic… He would be busy and couldn't meet her in the meantime, and his response would be slow. He held the pen with trembling fingers to write all that down in neat penmanship. And then, he wrote at the very end.

— Don't be like me.

He ended with these short words, and firmly believed— he shouldn’t be the goal of that girl. If he wanted the girl to be happy, then he shouldn’t meet with her again.

「— Is this the place?」

About two weeks after their last date, Elulufay and Greg took the day off at the same time, and visited the research lab built by Scientists on the outskirts of Norandot.

「Hmm? What's the matter, Great Mother? Not going in?」

「Yes, I'm going in… I'm just thinking about how to explain our purpose of visit.」

Elulufay pondered at the door. Greg nodded in agreement.

「It's a bit tough… Let's start with idle chatter and work from there.」

「There's no other choice. But I heard he is an eccentric man, what should we talk about— Hmm?」

She sensed a presence and turned around. Under the shade of a tree some distance away, a group of children were peeking at them timidly.

「... It's strangers.」

「Are they also the Professor's disciples?」

「So tall～」 「Looks scary～」

She could hear their whispers. Elulufay was about to soothe them when the door suddenly opened.

「Welcome, thank you for coming, come on in—」

The man in a white coat who appeared— Bajin, turned stiff with his mouth wide open. Seeing the unfamiliar woman in uniform and a buff man much taller than him, he said something insane.

「— T-This is weird, the kids are getting really tall nowadays.」

「— Pardon the rudeness of my colleague.」

After welcoming the two visitors and the children into the lab, Nazuna served them tea and apologized. Greg bowed, and Elulufay accepted the tea with a smile.

「Thank you. I'm just getting thirsty, so this is a big help.」

「It's rare seeing sailors here. Are you Major General Arkinex's acquaintances?」

「Yes, we know each other, but he didn't ask us to come.」

「Oh, is that so? Then who did?」

Nazuna asked in surprise. When Elulufay mentioned the dark-haired youth's name, she opened her eyes wide.

「Huh! Ikuta asked you to come? What's the story behind this...?」

「Actually, we were held prisoner in the Empire until recently. It's a long story...」

「Prisoners… Oh, it's fine if it's not convenient to tell us. I see, you're here to see Professor Anarai...」

At this point, Nazuna furrowed her brows. She glanced at the entrance and continued:

「Actually, the Professor isn't in, and it's not clear when he will return. I think he will be back tomorrow or the day after...」

「Hmm, I see. We came at the wrong time.」

After learning that the person they came to meet wasn't in, Elulufay crossed her arms and looked at Greg. *Shall we come next time?* — She was about to speak when she saw Bajin and the children doing something at a large table. Intrigued by that, she asked:

「— Oh right, what are they doing?」

「Oh, that? He is teaching the children Science. We started classes recently, but it's really popular. If it's not too much trouble, would you like to take a look?」

Nazuna proposed kindly. As Elulufay and Greg watched on, Bajin explained to the children.

「— Okay, let's revise a little. In the last experiment, I taught you the three states of matter. What are they?」

「Solid!」「Liquid!」「Gas～!」

「Good, you are correct. Well done, everyone.」

The children answered energetically, and Bajin praised them before continuing:

「Let's talk about something else— has anyone seen a boat before?」

「No～」「No～」「I have!」「Me too! I boarded one with Dad last time!」

「I see, I see— then, have you seen a boat floating in liquid?」

「huh～? What's that?」「It will sink.」「Bajin is saying weird things again～」

「It’s not weird～ we will be doing experiments about that today.」

Bajin said as he looked at the items on the table, then picked up a small item. It was a mini sailboat carved from wood.

「Oh, a boat.」 「A small boat.」 「How cute～」

「That’s right, it’s a boat. First, try putting it into this liquid.」

He placed the small boat into the glass container filled with liquid. But contrary to their expectations, the boat didn’t float, and sank down. The children frowned.

「... It sank.」 「The boat didn’t float.」 「How weird～」

「Hmm～ That’s right… what about here?」

Bajin used a spoon to scoop up the boat, washed it, then placed it in the liquid in a different glass container. They thought it would sink again, but it floated properly.

「Oh, it’s floating.」 「The water has a different colour.」 「Bajin, what’s this?」

「Well, actually— this is normal water, and the liquid earlier is oil.」

「Oil?」 「... The thing used for cooking?」

「That’s right. This boat will float on water, but not on oil. The boat isn’t strange, it’s because the specific weight of these two liquids are different.」

Bajin continued explaining, then took out another glass bottle and placed it before him.

「By using this difference, we can accomplish interesting things. First, we will pour in water, and to make things obvious, we will add dye.」

Bajin mixed in half a spoon of dye to make the water blue, then poured it into the bottle. He stopped when it was about half full, then picked up another container.

「And now, we add in oil on top of the water. But we will be doing it with a small spoon gently...」

「They will mix together, you know?」

「Don't worry. If we patiently add slowly...」

He used tenfold the time to carefully add oil into the glass bottle. On top of the blue water was a layer of transparent oil.

「... Oh!」 「... Amazing!」 「It didn't mix, it's separate～!」

「That's right, when the specific weights are different, the liquid will separate into layers. And now— we will put the small boat into this bottle...」

Bajin put down the bottle of oil, then used a pincer to put the mini sailboat into the bottle. He released the pincer mid way through the layer of oil, and the boat sank right onto the border between the two liquids— it sank through the oil and was floating on the water.

「— And now, a boat floating on liquid is complete!」

「「「「Oh—!」」」」

The excited children shouted. Bajin smiled at their reaction and started moving.

「I will now distribute the same materials and tools. Try to do this by yourselves.」

He picked up a box under the table and handed out the tools inside. Nazuna who had been watching all this while turned to Elulufay and Greg.

「It looks fun, right? Want to join us?」

She took two portions of equipment from Bajin, then placed it on the table and said. Elulufay snorted.

「... It might be inside a bottle, but asking a sailor to make a boat float is a challenge we can't back away from. Let's give it a try, Greg.」

「If you say so, Elulufay.」

Greg nodded and walked towards the table with her. They started by putting the mini sailboat together. They listened to Bajin's explanation, and got to work along with the troubled children.

「Ah, it's mixed together...」 「The boat sank! Why～?」

It could be done by following the instructions, but it was still difficult for children trying it out for the first time. They failed in all sorts of creative ways, while Elulufay and Greg swiftly completed the work.

「... Hmm, is this it?」

「Oh! It's floating. As expected of the navy, boats are your expertise.」

Bajin who came to check on them cheered at their outstanding performance, then turned to the children.

「If you don’t mind, can you teach the other children? I have my hands tied checking around.」

Bajin said with an awkward smile. Elulufay nodded with a smile.

「Haha— got it, we will take on this mission… First, that kid over there. I understand the feeling of wanting to float a big boat, but aren’t you too greedy?」

「Ugh～ it’s not floating...」

「It’s fine, let’s pick it up to change it. Don’t worry, it will work if we do it together.」

「... Hmm～...」

「Hey, if you keep sniffling, that man will eat you up.」

「... Yeek? Scary～!」

Elulufay’s gentle instructions paired with Greg’s mean mug got the stubborn children to work. And so, the two of them took care of the children with Nazuna and Bajin.

「— Yay, it’s floating! Hey look, look!」

The boat of the sixth person floated an hour after they started. Their work stopped several times because of the whimsical mood of the children, but Elulufay accompanied them without any complaint. She had the same smile as when she first started.

「Yes, well done. It’s a majestic boat, and will surely be swift.」

「Elulufay, come here, here!」 「How sly, it’s my turn! Look at my boat!」

「Yes yes, I will be right there. So, what kind of boat did you make? I'm looking forward to it～」

She spoke gently and warmly, and would listen to them patiently, so she was more popular with the children than Bajin. When the rush subsided, Nazuna who was also taking care of the children said with a wry smile.

「Thank you for the help… We have a huge crowd today, so you have been a big help.」

「No, I enjoyed myself too. I still don't know what Science is… but this is a good activity, and I will be happy to join in any time.」

「Please join us again, we conduct lessons rather frequently… But I'm surprised, Tenerexilla-san feels more like a nanny or teacher than a soldier.」

「Haha— suitability aside, I simply like the idea of raising children… Because my greatest wish is to not send the people I care for into the battlefield.」

She shared her feelings quietly. Sensing the struggles in her words, Nazuna probed:

「... This is a little rude, but did Ikuta said something to you about that?」

「Oh, I'm surprised that you can tell. He did said sternly that I will be crushed in despair if I go on like this.」

「... He said that?」

When she learned that fact, Nazuna thought about the intention of her junior disciple who introduced this woman to this place. On the

other hand, Greg was tending to the kids as he observed them from the corner of his eye.

「—Hmm? Didn't you finish long ago, little girl?」

「I want to do it again! Please wait, scary man!」

「That last part is unnecessary. Let me see… you put a lot of effort into the boat, huh?」

「Ahaha, Kasha always do her best.」

The other children already finished, but a girl continued working at a corner of the table. Bajin and the other children treated this as a common sight, as the girl put a boat together with amazing concentration.

「Yes, this will do! Next will be putting the boat in gently...」

Her hand holding the pincers was shaking a little. The boat slowly sank into the oil— when it reached the boundary with the water, the boat she carefully made stopped at that position.

「... Yay! It's floating! Everyone, come and see!」

The girl shouted loudly to get everyone over. Elulufay and the children got closer and opened their eyes wide.

「This is...」

On the mini boat floating between the water and oil, there were two people. She took a lot of time to sculpt the figures, so even their clothes and hairstyle could be seen. One of them was the girl herself, but the other one was the problem— the white hair and dark green clothes resembled a certain person.

「Fufu, this is a masterpiece! With this, Jean will cheer up too!」

「Oh, so it really is him— Do you know Jean well?」

「Ah, you too, big sister? Then you should know that Jean is feeling down, right?」

「Hmm… It has been a while since I last saw him.」

Elulufay answered vaguely. She didn't know how the white-haired officer was doing recently. The girl hung her head and continued.

「I wrote him a letter and received a reply. He… wrote something strange.」

「Strange?」

「Yes, something about...『Don't be like me』.」

The Great Mother of White Wings opened her eyes wide open. That wasn't something Jean Arkinex would say to his junior. The girl seemed to feel the same way.

「It's the first time he wrote something like that. Jean must be tired.
」

「......」

「So I want to cheer him up. Will him cheer up if I give this to him?」

The girl picked up the bottle with a smile. Elulufay narrowed her eyes at the bottle and nodded:

「... You are really kind. I'm sure Jean will be happy to receive it.」

「Yes!」

The girl answered energetically. The experiment ended on that note, so Bajin and the children started cleaning up. Elulufay naturally went to help, and Nazuna quietly stood beside her.

「Tenerexilla-san, if you have time… Why don't we chat? We might not be as good as the Professor… But if you are fine with us...」

She looked right at Elulufay and suggested. Elulufay thought about it, then nodded in agreement. She signalled to Greg with a gaze, then faced Nazuna and said to her:

「I should be the one asking for your assistance… Even Jean is wavering, so I won't last if I ignore this feeling of mine.」

The Great Mother of White Wings said with premonition in her heart— It was time for something deep within her to change.

Chapter 3: What the Heart Yearns

The Empress spent her days without much division between private and official matters. Even when she returned to the inner palace after finishing her work, the various national problems would still weigh on her mind. Being mentally prepared to deal with any problems no matter night or day was the style of Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik.

「......」「......」

But there were times for her to relax. That was when no one else was watching during the times she spent with the dark-haired youth.

「.. Solork.」

「Hmm?」

Hearing his name, the youth seated in a chair beside her lifted his head out of his book. His dark eyes were as gentle as ever.

「Nothing… I just want to say your name.」

「I see.」

The youth nodded lightly and patted the girl's head. Chamille closed her eyes and felt the gentle caress of his fingers— she no longer feared this amount of intimacy.

And of course, this change didn't happen overnight. Ikuta and her spent a lot of time together and spoke a lot, and embraced her with his warm arms— the accumulation of countless interactions gradually melted the heart of the girl. He spent a lot of time to convey his unwavering love to her, and for her to enjoy this love.

「......」

What the old sage told her at the Three Nation Conference also pushed her… Yatorishino Igsem loved her just like Ikuta. The thing she could never think up by herself pushed Chamille to lean on the dark-haired youth, and acknowledge the existence of the vermillion-haired girl beside him.

This was a tranquil place that Chamille never had. The unquestionable love made it clear he wanted her to be here.

「... Ah—」

The more self conscious she was, the harder it was to believe… She shouldn't receive such happiness. She shouldn't— but she was too guilty to push it away.

「... Hmm...」

The youth was like the sun to her, and the girl basked in this happiness. At the same time, she believed firmly that her reckoning would come. The day when the corrupted bloodline ends, and all the accumulated sins were accounted for.

「......」

Ikuta also knew what the girl was thinking. No— it would be more accurate to say that he was always keeping track. How Chamille's mentality was changing, and in what way? Learning that change was his most important mission.

His effort bore fruit. She received Ikuta's love, got a friend in Vackie, and she changed a lot. However— it wasn't enough to waver her resolve regarding her life. She was still yearning for her destruction. She still believed that was the fitting end for a descendant of the Eternal Sprite Tree bloodline.

「...Ugh...」

There was still around a year before the final battle… Even with Ikuta's capability, it was too short to save the soul of the girl.

「.. Solork?」

The youth put down his book and turned to Chamille and embraced her. He did this as he repeated the vow for the uncountable times in his mind— *I will save her*

. He would bet his feelings, the emotions of the vermillion-haired girl before her death, and everything in his heart.

「......」「——」

They embraced in the quiet room— and made contradictory resolve in their hearts.



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There was a long queue under the scorching sun, and everyone was holding a sack tightly, waiting hungrily for their turn.

「— Don't rush and queue up! There is no need to hurry, everyone will get a share!」

At the front of the line, soldiers were taking the sacks and pouring wheat in. The one in charge was Senpa Sazarf. He and his unit were in the south of the Central Empire, giving aid to the impoverished citizens.

「I never thought a sudden distribution will draw such a crowd...」

「This seems to be the result of the price surge of crops. With news of the looming final battle with Kioka, there are a lot of hoarders...」

His adjutant Melza analyzed as she watched the impoverished citizens with a pained face. Sazarf sighed, he heard the same thing a few days ago.

「I know that… But can't we solve that by banning this a few times?」

「It's an economical problem… Given the instability of the world, the flow of money and resources is getting unstable too. In the end, aside from distributing food like this to deal with the symptoms, there isn't much soldiers like us can do.」

After glancing at his adjutant showing a vexed face, Sazarf said quietly:

「... That's true. What we can do is to end the war quickly and usher in world peace.」

He said casually, which made Melza stare at her superior officer with eyes wide open.

「—」

「W-Why are you staring at me like that, Lieutenant Colonel Melza. Did I say something strange?」

The sudden gaze made the man panic, but Melza shook her head before him.

「... I'm surprised because it's not strange. Ending the war and world peace— I never thought I will hear such manly words from Brigadier General Sazarf.」

Ugh, Sazarf was at a loss for words. He averted his gaze awkwardly, and Melza went around to his front with a wry smile.

「Don't make such a face, I'm impressed. Can I take it that… You're finally aware of your position as a General?」

「... That's hard to say. I still don't get what kind of actions are befitting for a General. I can't imagine conducting myself like General Remeon or General Shiba.」

He stated his true feelings. He had always felt troubled that compared to the aforementioned Generals, he lacked the dignity of the brass. He switched to a cigar because of that too. Sensing Sazarf's uneasiness and willingness to improve, Melza advised him in her own way.

「It's fine not to use them as your goal. Can't you use other people as reference. Like Field Marshal Solork or others.」

「He’s the one guy I can’t use as a model… Regrettably, I can’t think of any General that I can aspire to be like. But I do know one negative example.」

「Negative example, huh?」

Melza was intrigued by his rare use of that term and asked. Sazarf nodded:

「That’s right, I won’t turn out like him no matter how hard I fall. However, he’s already dead—」

Before he could finish, suddenly— some distance away from him, a man who finally got his turn to get food from the soldiers locked eyes with Sazarf.

「......!」

That man immediately looked away. He pulled up his tattered shirt to cover his face and stood still with his head low. He was overreacting for just meeting Sazarf’s eyes, which made Sazarf tilt his head in confusion.

「... Hmm?」

「What is it, Brigadier General?」

「... Nothing...」

Bothered by that, Sazarf stared at that man. A while later, the man took back his sack from the soldier, as if he couldn’t take the pressure any longer.

「T-That’s enough.」

「Hey, wait! It’s just half full—」

With no regards for the soldier stopping him, the man turned and left in quick steps— but at the moment he turned, Sazarf caught a glimpse of the face under the shirt.

「—Lieutenant General Safida?」

He thought it was impossible and shouted that name in relex. Suddenly— that man's back jumped as if he was whipped.

「U… Uwah!」

The man suddenly sprinted at full speed. His suspicion turned into certainty at that reaction, and Sazarf leaned forth with a start.

「Wait...! Seize that man! Quickly!」

The bodies of the soldiers and citizens were obstacles stopping him from chasing directly, so he ordered his men to do so. The troops were confused by the sudden order, but those who understood his intent still ran forth.

「Wait!」「Sorry, passing through...!」「Stop right there! That man over there, halt〜!」

But when they started taking action, that man had mixed into the crowd. The soldiers couldn't give chase through the crowd properly, and stopped after losing sight of the man. A few minutes later, they returned to Sazarf and reported:

「My apologies, we lost him...!」「He blended into the crowd of impoverished citizens...!」

Sazarf grit his teeth. He shouted with an intimidating face:

「Don't stop here, tell the troops to spread out! He couldn't have gone far!」

「B-Brigadier General? Please wait, do you want to stop the hand outs?」

Melza restrained him in her role as an adjutant, since this was as good as abandoning an ongoing mission. Sazarf turned stiff.

「... Tch...!」

If he thought about it calmly, this was obvious. Without clear instructions, the organization couldn't swiftly switch from their distribution duties into a tracking mission. And sending a large group to search would deviate from their current mission.

Sazarf rewrote the orders in his mind as he glared in the direction where that man ran off to. He might be long gone, but the face he saw for an instant lingered on his mind.

「—Lieutenant General Safida is still alive?」

Ikuta was surprised when he heard that report through the Sprite. He never expected to hear that name.

「No, pardon me, It should be Private Safida now… After the Northern Unrest, he should have been executed after getting sentenced in a court martial. Did you really see him?」

「I won't forget his face even if I forget my parents! He should still be around here! Please allow me to send the main forces here to search!」

Sazarf's anxiety was clear even through the Sprite. Ikuta sensed Sazarf was losing his cool and asked.

「Please calm down, Brigadier General Sazarf… I want to check a few things. Is the suspected Private Safida armed?」

「...? No, he appears to be unarmed...」

「Any signs of his companions? Is he moving as an organization, are there any signs of a conspiracy?」

「...... No...」

Sazarf's voice sounded puzzled whenever the youth confirmed something with him. The dark-haired youth knew it was harsh, but he said firmly:

「In that case, even if that man really is Private Safida, I can't permit a large scale search at this point.」

「B-But why?」

「Because it is pointless strategically. Sending out search parties will delay the progress of the current mission. We can't make up for the losses even if we capture Private Safida… We don't have much time until the final battle. I want you to complete the food distribution on schedule and return to base as soon as possible, Brigadier General.」

「......!」

Sazarf couldn't find the words to refuse what Ikuta said as the top commander of the Army. There was a time limit before the final battle, and the main reason for this food distribution was for Sazarf to build up experience in commanding a brigade. There was still tons of work waiting for Sazarf but on base, so his superior would obviously halt the search.

「I will question the person in charge back then about the chances of Private Safida still being alive. How many people did you send out to search?」

「... One cavalry platoon and one infantry platoon...」

「When did you order the search?」

「... About an hour ago...」

Since the cavalry was dispatched and such a long time had passed, it meant they had lost track of the target. With no chance of solving the problem immediately, he couldn't permit sending more people out.

「Don't send any more troops. Execute the distribution as planned, and return on the scheduled date… I will be counting on you to continue the mission.」

Sazarf didn't refute— a while later, Ikuta silently ended the call.

The cavalry kicked up a dust storm when they ran past. In the lowlands covered by grass, someone was watching intensely.

「... How is it?」

「... A lot of riders just went by. I don't think they saw us.」

A childish voice came from the depression. When the sound of the cavalry faded away, the short figures got up one by one.

「That seems to be the case. Isn't that great, old man.」

「... Ugh...」

It was a group of young children holding sacks. There was also a shivering middle aged man squatting by their feet. He had a medium built, and wore ragged clothes. He was the former commander of the Northern Stronghold who had slimmed down a lot, Tamshiikushik Safida.

「By the way… Tell us earlier if you are wanted by the army. If I knew, I wouldn't have asked you to collect the hand outs.」

The oldest girl who was the boss of the children muttered. The other children crowded around Safida.

「Hey～ What kind of trouble did you make?」 「Murder? Banditry?」 「Old man, you are actually a terrible villain, right?」

The children kept asking questions without any malicious intent. He glanced at them as the boss girl peeked into the sack Safida brought back.

「There's only half the expected amount of wheat…? Well, you did well not dropping the sack. Good work, old man.」

She said as she patted the shoulder of the man squatting down. Safida realized that the danger had passed, and he looked up timidly.

「Alright, let's go back! The old man will rest one time! You guys, carry back the stuff!」

「Yay～!」 「Got it～!」 「Food～! Go back and eat～!」

The children yelled energetically. As if he was drawn by their enthusiasm, the man got up unsteadily from the depression.

—Safida couldn't really remember how he got into this situation.

His memory after being sentenced to death in court martial was a blur. The only thing he remembered was the fear he felt when he was sentenced to death by gunfire as a class one war criminal.

He spent his days in jail fearfully. The execution date wasn't told to the criminal, so he would spend each day worrying if it would be his last. Whenever the prison warden sent him food, he would fear their footsteps, squatting on the floor and pray that the warden wouldn't take him away.

He couldn't remember how much time passed when a strange thing happened. The presence of the prison wardens disappeared. No food came no matter how long he waited, and he didn't get any response

even if he shouts. In the one man prison cell, Safida thought— this is his only chance to break out of prison.

He kicked the iron bars with all his might. The bars wouldn't break with just that, but the one man cell for class one war criminals had not been used for a long time, and some places that couldn't be seen had deteriorated badly. So Safida kicked the bars for two days and two nights, and barely made a gap for one person to squeeze through. His old physique wouldn't have fitted, but he had grown thin during his time in prison.

He made it above ground, and found two factions had made the base fall into chaos. The Imperial soldiers had split into two groups and faced off against each other, the base had lost control, and no one suspected that he broke out of prison. He learned a long time later that this was the result of the Remeon faction's military coup.

Anyway, Safida used this chance to break out of prison. With nowhere to go, he started wandering.

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「... Is the information accurate?」

Inside an office in the palace. Ikuta perused the documents on his desk and listened to the report. Yorga nodded.

「On your request, General Remeon confirmed things with the wardens at that time… They colluded their testimonies to pretend that the execution had been done. So it's true that Private Safida broke out of prison during the chaos of the civil war.」

He stated the facts he had sorted out. The dark-haired youth sighed.

「And he had been hiding all this while? … It's possible. The Northern Territories aside, not many people know the face of the former commander of the Northern Stronghold.」

「I don't know that person, but is he a dangerous man that can't be left alone?」

They couldn't ignore it if that was so. Yorga asked with worry, and Ikuta shook his head.

「He might hate the people related to his downfall like Brigadier General Sazarf and me, but he is not a threat. He already lost his network, and lacked the leadership to do anything big. At best, he can just hide his identity and erk out a living. Hence, the problem is that Brigadier General Sazarf found him...」

He was hesitant to continue when Kusu gave an incoming call notification. The youth thought about his explanation as he picked up the call.

「... This is Solork.」

「Sazarf here. Have you found any clues regarding the matters about Private Safida?」

He asked stiffly right off the bat. Ikuta didn't beat around the bush and answered:

「... Yes. Starting from the conclusion, there is a good chance that the person you saw is Tamshiikushik Safida.」

「— As I thought!」

「It seems that he broke out of prison during the civil war, and the wardens back then colluded to lie.」

After Ikuta said that, Sazarf asked with a resolved tone:

「Field Marshal Sir… I know I'm repeating myself, but can you increase the number of people conducting the search?」

「... I know how you feel, but expediting the capture of Private Safida is inconsequential. That place is filled with people of dubious origins, and the terrain is suitable for hiding. Even if we mobilize all the men or search for witnesses steadily, this can't be done in a just a day or two.」

「I know that very well. So, it will be fine even if it's on the day my mission here ends, please send in a battalion to join the search. I will make arrangement to complete the distribution on schedule and return to base without delay.」

Ikuta was troubled about how to answer. It wasn't impossible, but this plan was very reckless, so he couldn't accept this easily.

However— Before he could answer, Sazarf suddenly stopped using honorifics.

「... Hey, a lot of people died in the war, right.」

「... Yes.」

「There are many of them we didn't wish would die… But contrary to our wishes, they will keep on dying, that's the reality of war. I'm a soldier too, so I can accept that much.」

Ikuta nodded firmly. In the Northern Unrest, the naval battle, and the coup— they witnessed this reality countless times until it was branded into their eyelids. However, that was why…

「However, people like this always die first, while those who should be dead will somehow survive— I can't accept that. Isn't this a nightmare?」

That was why Sazarf drew the line he wouldn't back down from. Both the good guys and the bad people would die indiscriminately— that was the reality of the battlefield he could accept. For the soldier Senpa Sazarf, this was the only pride he would not let go off.

「My dead subordinates won't come back, so I want to make up for their deaths. I believe this to be the only way to mourn them, and had worked hard until this day.」

「......」

「So— please, First Lieutenant Ikuta.」

He pleaded with his comrade from the northern unrest, instead of the Imperial Field Marshal. Since he went that far— the dark-haired youth couldn't think of any answer beside giving his consent.

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—Where did I go wrong?

After he broke out of prison and started wandering, Tamshiikushik Safida often thought about that. He couldn't find the answer. He just had a vague impression that he made a fatal mistake at a certain juncture.

He had a powerful backing all his life. His Safida house's relation with nobles had always been like this, and anything that could be called a trial was cleared away with the power of his privilege. When he was a child, he could get whatever he wanted, and anything he found to be an eye sore was taken out of view. He only realized a long time later that was a special privilege.

When he grew old enough to read, he got interested in war stories and lost himself in them. The cool images of the soldiers and the exploits of heroes made him forget the time. How much of the

records were fact, and how much of it was fiction— that didn't matter to him back then. He took for granted that he would be a hero in the future too. It wasn't a wish, but a certainty for him. He never considered the possibility of him failing to become a hero. He lacked the experience of being denied things he wanted while growing up.

During dinner one night, he casually told his parents that he wanted to be a soldier, and his parents swiftly paved the path for him. To them, getting a noble as a backer was normal when they did something, and this was done in a way beyond his expectations. In order to keep the nobles' influence in the military, they needed more soldiers with collars around their necks.

And so, without him knowing, Tamshiikushik Safida's dream didn't belong to him alone, and became a major project holding the schemes of many nobles.

Because of the excellent education environment prepared by his wealthy parents, he was smart compared to his peers. But if his goal was to pass the Officer Cadet School exams, it wasn't enough.

When he was studying to pass the exam, he ran into a wall for the first time in his life. He realized that it wasn't easy to win against the numerous aspirants within the nation.

However, that drove him to work harder instead. The soldiers in the stories all overcome adversaries to greatness, and he felt he could accomplish the same thing. This exam was his first battle. He motivated himself this way to study— and put in a lot of effort too. If it was just the written exam, it wouldn't be strange if his academic abilities reached the minimum standard.

The first exam soon arrived, and he faced it with strong tension. The thought of everything he had worked for so far was being tested, his

hand started to shake. He persevered through force of will to fill in the answer sheet. He ripped through a few sheets of paper because he used too much force, but he displayed all the efforts he had accumulated so far. He passed the first selection splendidly, and progressed to the second practical stage.

However, the problems started here. Unlike the first selection where he faced the questions one on one, the second selection required coordination between the aspirants and how they competed with each other, testing for abilities different from the first selection. And of course, Safida also trained for this. Although he made preparations, the 「training partner」 arranged by his parents didn't argue with him seriously or tried to ostracise him, and treated him adequately because of the difference of their status. Without realizing that, Safida went into the actual exam with other blood thirsty competitors.

The results were terrible. He had a difference of opinions with his teammates, and didn't dare to stand his ground to the very end. He failed to gain the initiative of any discussions, and was toyed around. His team also fell repeatedly for the tricks of their opponents, and they were almost wiped out. His opponents back then were the future famous generals, Solvenares Igsem and Terushinha Remeon, so another factor was that he was just unlucky.

When he returned home after the exam, he didn't say anything to his parents who welcomed him, then hid in his room and cried the whole night. For the youth who had never known failure, the shock of his first defeat was too great. The gulf between his ideal and his current state made him furious, and he shut himself in his room without eating or drinking for several days. He needed time to get his emotions in order.

── Suddenly, his parents shouted joyously outside his room.

His parents knocked on the door of the son who had not shown his face for days and said— Cheer up, Tamshiikushik, your acceptance notification has arrived. You are amazing, and will definitely become a general—

He rushed out of his room, snatched the acceptance letter and stared at it. When he saw his name on it— he didn't feel joy or surprise, just a strong sense of dissonance. He was holding something he always wanted, but it was also critically different.

In any case, Tamshiikushik Safida started his career as a military officer. He didn't suffer any setbacks or frustration— everything happened according to his expectations.

「—old man. Hey, old man.」

He snapped back to reality. The man was immersed in his past, and returned to the present when he was called.

「W-What is it?」

「Your hands aren't moving. You have to finish all that by evening, you know?」

When he heard that, Safida looked at his hands. In the rundown room with a low ceiling, he was using a crate as a makeshift table, and working with the light of a Luminous Sprite. He remembered when he saw the pile of notes stacked up to his right.

「Y-Yes… That's right...」

「I'm counting on you～ The money you earn is important, old man— Ok, settled.」

The girl fixed the hole in the ceiling, then walked over to look over Safida's shoulder. She then groaned a few seconds later.

「Uwah, just looking at that makes my head spin… Old man, you are amazing to handle so many words and numbers in one day.」

「No, I'm not doing much… I was educated, anyone can do this...」

「Is that so? We can write too, but we can't write such a long essay. I want to be educated too～ it seems tough, but I can do all sorts of things after learning that, right?」

The girl said as she wielded a rusty hammer to repair the crack in the wall. *I'm amazed we can live here*
. Safida thought as he watched her. No, can this be called a house? The walls and ceilings were just makeshift planks, and the floor was a thin straw mat. Unlike the children, Safida had to kneel inside the house since the ceiling was too low.

「I want to find proper work— I don't want to make a living by stealing or robbing anymore. It might be easier if things go well, but we often fail and our comrades get injured. I got beaten before too— Look.」

The girl then pulled up her shirt to show a painful bruise on the side of her belly. Safida frowned. This was an injury from being kicked really hard several times.

「We only have herbs we can gather, and we can't visit the doctors, so we will die if we get a grave injury～」

「......」

「Like I said, I want to earn money properly. Then we can get food, and we can live if we eat. Good things will come if we are alive. Right, old man?」

His room mate patted his shoulder, and started repairing the house again. Safida glanced at her back and thought about what she just said.

「... If we are alive, huh?」

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「—Hmm? L-Lieutenant Colonel Melza, aren't you staying?」

Inside the large tent set up in the wild, First Lieutenant Metrache Lance who was suddenly tasked with continuing the mission asked her Superior. Melza sighed.

「I wanted to do so, but the situation has changed. I will leave this place to you, so continue the distribution as planned before we come back. Any questions?」

「W-When will you be back?」

「Three days in the latest. I will leave my partner behind, so use it to contact us in an emergency. Any other questions?」

「Erm, well...」

Metrache looked anxious. She was working peacefully beside Melza, and felt uneasy when she was entrusted with command of the site. Realizing how she felt, Melza grabbed her shoulders firmly.

「Straighten your back, First Lieutenant Lance. You can easily assume command over a site of this level, just what is troubling you?」

Metrache held her breath. Her superior officer stared right at her, wiping away her urge to rely on Melza.

「...! Yes Mdm, I have received my orders.」

Metrache saluted with the serious face of a soldier. Melza nodded with satisfaction, then turned to her superior who was on the other side of the tent.

「Sorry for the wait, Brigadier General Sazarf. The handing over of command is complete, we can go at any time.」

She said to her superior who was staring at the map on the table. Sazarf raised his gaze slightly.

「Yes… But I'm surprised. Since I'm going, I thought you will stay here.」

That made Melza furrowed her brows.

「...I see. So you think you'll be fine staying by yourself?」

「... Huh?」

「Never mind, this made it clear to me that my judgement is on point— time is precious, let's quickly formulate the plan.」

She ended the conversation and looked at the map. It was already marked with the settlements nearby which were potential targets.

「The time limit is three days. Even if we send out the cavalry, searching mindlessly will likely lead to failure. We need to narrow the search area. Brigadier General, do you have any plans?」

When his adjutant asked him that, Sazarf nodded.

「... From how he looked when I saw him, I don't think he is living a normal life. He must have forged his identity, and a suspicious person like that can only work temp jobs at best.」

「In that case… He might be a beggar digging through trash.」

「Yes, there are limited places where he can survive. Places with larger populations— But just a larger village won't do. For a suspicious person to gain employment, it has to be a somewhat prosperous town.」

He looked at the map with his speculation in mind. The search area they should focus on naturally appeared.

「There are limited places that match that criteria within walking distance from here. Even if we check in order from the closest town… Three days should be more than enough.」

「I have no objections. Should we split the units to the potential places?」

「No, to avoid any lapses, I want to sweep each place thoroughly. This might sound inefficient to you, but let's move as a group this time.」

「Understood— the first destination should be here then. Let's go.」

They nodded at each other and left the large tent. They started their search for Tamshiikushik Safida under this strict time limit.

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When Safida joined the military as an Officer Cadet, the war between the Empire and Kioka was deteriorating. The main reason was the failure in diplomacy instead of strategy.

Skirmishes occurred frequently at the borders, and it was common for them to grow into small scale battles. Back then, the cabinet often orders the military to 「recover the lost territories in the name of the Emperor」, demanding the army to recover lands that didn't matter much strategically. Kioka exploited that stubbornness to

bleed the Imperial Army's resources in the long term. In the end, their offensive campaign turned into the defensive, and the Imperial Army always suffered greater losses than the enemy.

However, Safida wasn't too pessimistic. He thought the Empire still had national power to spare, and the more battles there were, the more chances soldiers could earn merits. The defeat during the Officer Cadet School Exams left a wound on him, and made him yearn for accomplishment. It wasn't just to boost his reputation, this was also a way to get him closer to his ideal image of a soldier.

And as expected, he was deployed to live combat shortly after his commission— however, it wasn't an intense battle, with both sides shooting from afar, a small scale skirmish to keep each other in check. During situations like this, both sides would deploy as many troops as possible to pressure the other side, so they would gather inexperienced junior officers to make up the numbers. Keeping the soldiers in formation on the move, deploying in line formation according to the books and firing at the target— just that standard was good enough.

It might look like a farce in some ways, but it was still a war. Safida was very eager. Since it was the battlefield where the enemy was, he would have a chance to perform too. The officers from his batch all looked nervous because of their first battle, but he was the only one with eyes filled with expectations.

However, something strange happened during the march— only his platoon was ordered to deviate from the assigned route, and forced to stand by indefinitely in a corner of the battle line. Safida protested. That place was far from the main battlefield, and there wouldn't even be a skirmish happening there. But his protest was rejected, and Safida's unit was stationed outside the battlefield. The irrational treatment made him frustrated and anxious— he

wondered if his failure during the exams caused him to lose the opportunity to fight properly.

The order Safida found unfathomable kept him safe from danger. That was because the battle line which was meant to keep both sides in check could be ignored at any time. The Kioka army used that lapse in mentality to launch an attack. The unprepared Imperial forces suffered heavy losses, and when the frontline commander was killed in action, they had to engage with their command structure in a mess. It wasn't as bad as the quagmire of the Northern Unrest, but it was still a terrible loss that left its mark in Imperial history.

From the big picture, they simply fell for the Kioka army's scheme for this battle. But with a closer look, this had a different significance. Because— three soldiers performed admirably during this terrible battle, and became famous generals.

Two of them were the aforementioned Solvenares Igsem and Terushinha Remeon. With higher ranking officers just watching from the side, they used their unique talents to open a path to safety. As the descendents of 「Igsem of the blade」 and 「Remeon of the gun」, great things were expected of them when they entered the army, but their debut battle was incredible. However— They were just young Second Lieutenants back then, and couldn't comment on the battle as a whole. The situation was worsening by the day.

At the same time, a certain unit deployed behind the frontlines for a different reason was being mustered. It was deployed in the back for a simple reason, because their commander had terrible results during training, so he was assigned to manage the backline. They were nominally set as a reserve unit for this battle, so when the main forces were in trouble, they were mobilized since having them as reinforcement was better than nothing.

The commander was Bada Sankrei, a Second Lieutenant back then. His unsoldierly behaviour made people roll their eyes, and his comrades scornfully call him a day time lantern— Later in the battle, his proposal allowed several thousand soldiers to retreat to safety, and was celebrated as a major accomplishment in Imperial history.

On the other hand, Safida wasn't aware of anything. From the beginning to the end, his unit wasn't involved in the battle. He was cut off from the front, and when the enemy's advances turned dangerous, he received orders to retreat to Central. He carried that order out in confusion. He was eager to fight, but he wasn't told about what happened in the frontlines.

Soon after, the war that gave birth to three heroes ended, and to maintain the facade before the citizens, the cabinet was eager to honor those with meritorious actions. Solvenares Igsem, Terushinha Remeon and Bada Sankrei received medals, and their accomplishments push them up the ranks swiftly.

In the award ceremony that Safida was attending, he watched with gritted teeth at those hailed as heroes from his generation. He was vexed— *why were they the only ones to perform? Why didn't I get a chance? I can fight too. If I go into the battlefield with them, I can stand up there too.*

When his heart was filled with frustration— someone called his name. 「Second Lieutenant Tamshiikushik Safida, come up to the stage.」

Safida didn't understand why he was called. He walked up on stage, showered by the dubious gaze of his colleagues. The senior officer who just gave medals to Bada's trio walked over timidly and said to him with a smile— 「in honour of your valiant battle, I will now award you a medal in recognition of your efforts.」

Ignoring the surprised Safida, the senior officer put a medal onto his uniform before turning to the audience to explain— the performance of the three aforementioned officers were obvious, but they shouldn't forget the hero behind the scene. His unit was deployed away from the main battlefield, but they stopped a Kioka detachment attempting to flank the main unit. If he didn't block the enemy's advances, the allied forces would have suffered incalculable losses.

The senior officer fluently stated something Safida heard for the first time. His colleagues looked at him with a mixture of suspicion and bafflement, and he felt the same dissonance when his parents told him he passed the Officer Cadet School Exams— That feeling sent a chill from his toes to his head, and made him realize something.

He realized that he wasn't standing here by his own merits, but brought here by a great, unknown power—

「— man. Hey, old man, don't daze off.」

Safida stood stiffly while staring into space, so the girl kicked his leg from behind.

「The head worker will yell at you if you stop again. We can't get paper work today, so we have to take this job.」

「Y-Yes...」

When he heard that, he remembered his current situation. He couldn't find work that made use of his high level of education, so he had to do temp work to dismantle a house. Feeling the gazes of the other workers, Safida swung his borrowed mallet in a panic.

「... Ughh...」

But he felt a sharp pain in his waist when his mallet struck, freezing him right there. The girl rushed to him when she realized that.

「What is it, your waist hurts again? Really now.」

The girl lent a shoulder to Safida and brought him to a corner of the worksite. After sitting him down, the girl turned around.

「I will give an excuse to the head worker, so come back as soon as you can. There are human traffickers lurking around our shelter recently, so I want to go back early.」

She returned to work right after saying that. Safida was impressed by her attitude again. Dismantling a house was a laborious job, but the girl worked around the workers, bringing them tools and making footholds. Work proceeded smoothly when she was around, and she was a big help.

「... Hey, why are you taking care of me?」

Safida endured the pain in his waist and went back to work, and dusk finally came after being shouted at all day. The two of them walked side by side back to their shelter, and he suddenly asked the girl.

「Hmm? Why? It's better to have more comrades, and our income will be more stable.」

「... Then, why did you let me join? Considering your safety, you shouldn't approach adults from dubious backgrounds.」

Safida said, realizing he didn't even tell her his name. *Hmm* ～ the girl groaned as she scratched her cheek.

「That might be true— But when we first met, you were getting beaten up by other vagrants when you were scrapping for leftovers in their turf?」

「Ugh...」

「I understand after seeing that scene. Oh, he isn’t familiar with the rules in this place. He doesn't know how to survive here, and doesn't have food or a place to go. He really is living on the edge.」

Safida had no words and fell silent. The girl continued with a laugh.

「Surprisingly, people like you don’t have evil thoughts because you can’t spare the effort to do so. You don’t think too much about things and will pounce on anyway to survive without hesitation. Isn’t that right, old man?」

「......」

「And I’m not letting you go out of good will. When I talked to you, didn’t I ask if you can read and write properly? We don’t have someone like that, so I want to recruit such a person, since it’s inconvenient to not have one.」

The girl explained, and her face suddenly turned serious.

「And also— maybe because you are ostracized.」

「...? What do you mean?」

Safida asked puzzledly. The girl thought for a moment before pointing at her arm.

「Look, my skin tone is a little dark, right? I have some Shinnack blood in me.」

「... Oh...」

「The people around won’t accept me for this reason. So I have no choice but to hang out with other ostracized people, and look for lonely people like you. People like that all have weird personality and

are hard to get along with— but we won't betray each other once we become comrades.」

The girl said a little happily. It felt difficult for him to look directly at her face, Safida stuttered:

「... It might be strange... for me to say this...」

「Hmm?」

「You have to be more careful in picking your companions… There are many villains with weird personality, hard to get along with and stay alone.」

He said some self deprecating words. The girl was shocked for a moment before bursting out in laughter.

「Haha, what is this, are you talking about yourself, old man?」

「......」

「Oh… Speaking of which, you are wanted by the army? What did you do~ Oh~ Did you sneak into the kitchen in their base to steal dinner?」

Guu〜 When the girl said that in jest, their stomachs growled at the same time.

「... We got hungry chatting here— Let's hurry back, old man. The others are waiting with a famished stomach too.」

「... Yes—」

On the girl's urging, Safida quickened his pace. What could they eat with the money they earned today? — Having gotten used to his life, he started thinking about that.

「— Finally found you.」

A familiar voice pierced his back like an ice lance.

「I was looking for you for so long, Lieutenant General Safida. What are you doing here?」

「A-Ahh—」

The girl turned around in shock. However, Safida was too afraid to turn back. The other party was holding his shoulder with an incredibly firm grip.

「I thought you already went to the other side, but you're wandering around in a strange place. How troubling, there's a limit to going the wrong way, right?」

As the man drew near, he gradually appeared before Safida. Senpa Sazarf stared right into his eyes— there was obsession and murderous intent in his hunter-like eyes.

「Let's go back. I will bring you to the right destination— you won't go the wrong way this time.」

Safida's teeth were chattering. To him, that was as good as a second death sentence.

However— while he was standing still, someone acted in a way they never expected.

「— Ugh...?」

The impact of the sudden pain made Sazarf's face contort. He looked down and saw a girl biting his wrist with a menacing face.

「Tch— old man, run!」

Using the gap when Sazarf relaxed his grip, the girl kicked Safida's back. He was still grabbing Sazarf's arm as she pointed out the escape path to the man.

「Go down that alley! You know the path, right? Shake off their pursuit— hurry!」

Her words pushed his back and Safida sprinted off. Sazarf tried to give chase with his men, but the girl grabbing his arm refused to let go.

「Wait...! Hey, let go! Please let go!」

「Why will I let go!? You're going to kill the old man, right!?」

After saying that, she grabbed his arm and bit again. Sazarf frowned from the pain, but he was more worried about harming the girl's teeth if he was too rough. He couldn't stay cold to the end, and tried persuading her even though he knew it was a waste of time.

「Don't misunderstand, that man is a criminal! Not someone you should protect!」

「Oh, is that so〜! I don't remember being protected by the soldiers either!」

The girl wasn't going to listen anyway. She tightened her grip on Sazarf's arm, and Melza who couldn't stand it anymore interjected.

「Calm down, Brigadier General Sazarf!— you let go too! If you don't stop, we will retaliate!」

「Try it then, dummy〜!」

The girl taunted as she back dashed. Seeing that she would get captured if she continued making a scene, she turned and ran. The girl disappeared into an ally in no time, and Sazarf groaned.

「... Why did that child...」

「Please don’t move! I need to bandage your wound!」

Seeing her superior was injured, Melza immediately summoned a medic. But he raised a hand to stop her and took action.

「Leave the bandaging for later, I have to chase him… He ran off again, I have to get him...!」

Sazarf muttered as if he was in a feverish rant, which made Melza gasp. She had never seen her superior officer act this way.

— Safida who got a medal in a battle where he didn't participate in continued rising through the ranks.

Whenever he got mobilized for a battle somewhere, his unit would be assigned far away from the frontlines. The war would end while he stood by idly, and it became a norm for him to be praised for the efforts he never experienced. If all these exploits were true, then Tamshiikushik Safida would be a great hero on par with those three people. However, he knew better than anyone else that wasn't true.

At this stage, Safida realized the position he was in. Passing the Officer Cadet School exams despite failing, and getting merits for the battles he never experienced, his meteoric rise up the ranks were all arranged by the nobles who supported him. In order to gain influence within the military, they worked hard to promote the people on their side.

If they wanted to back someone, they should at least support someone who was capable. Such a school of thought existed, however, outstanding talents like them would often break free from the nobles control and act independently. The aristocrats concluded from their past experiences that they should choose someone adequately incompetent in order to control them in the long term. And Safida was selected to be their chess piece based on that criteria.

He was very reluctant to accept this. However, Safida feared losing the backings of the nobles. After all, his promotions after passing the exam were all arranged by them. Once he learned that, it was too

scary for him to let go of this special privilege. Safida was not confident about facing life without the backers propping him up.

In the end, he submitted himself to that position. He didn't need to make any decision, and just carry out the orders given from above, and he would climb up the ranks automatically. His comrades who felt suspicious about this in the beginning soon realized the intentions of the nobles behind him, and scorned him openly. Noble's dog, paper tiger hero— that was what they thought about Safida.

And of course, resistance from the military was firm. Any soldier with a conscience would not want an incompetent senior officer in top management.

The result of their resistance and the demands of the nobles ended up with the compromise of exiling Safida to the Northern Stronghold. The defence of the Grand Arfatra Mountains known as the 「Stairs of Heaven」, didn't require anything aside from supervising the Shinnack Tribe in the mountains. This was the only place to insert a paper tiger high ranking officer, so the nobles accepted this after an undertable negotiation.

He might be exiled to the borders, but all senior officers had the obligation and right to participate in conferences conducted in Central. Just having Safida periodically express their opinions during these military conferences was a success to them.

Safida spent most of his life in the northern territories while maintaining that status quo. There wasn't anything for him to invest his interest in, and he slowly became decadent. He dumped all his daily work to his subordinates, and his suppressed desires were vented out in a twisted way as he oppressed the weak and the Shinnack Tribe.

Commander of the Northern Stronghold. After being pushed by a powerful force, Tamshiikushik Safida ended up there. He was submersed up to his shoulders in stagnant water created by the authority of the nobles, and when he realized it, he couldn’t go anywhere else.

「Huff, huff, puff...!」

He kept running, sensing pursuers behind him— When he realized it, Safida was standing in a deserted alley alone.

「Huff, puff… Did I shook them off...!?」

He listened carefully but couldn’t hear any footsteps behind. He sighed in relief— but when he thought about his situation, fear struck Safida once again.

「What do I do… What do I...」

He shook them off, but he wasn’t home free yet. Sazarf saw him by chance, and came searching with a whole army. He wasn’t sure how many troops were mobilized, but he should assume that the main exits in this town had been blockaded.

「... And, what about that girl...?」

The image of that girl struggling desperately to free Safida flashed across his mind. He escaped— but what would happen to that girl if she was captured? Since she was with him, she would get interrogated by Sazarf. She might even be used cruelly like a bait to draw out prey.

「... Ughh...」

Safida didn’t know his adversary well enough to be certain that Sazarf would not resort to that. During his time in the Northern Stronghold, Senpa Sazarf was just one of his many subordinates.

Sazarf did seem like a nice guy, but from the way Sazarf stared at him, Safida wasn't so sure.

「... Ugghhh...!」

Safida was troubled until the end before he turned back with heavy steps, praying that the girl escaped safely.

「— Oh, that guy? I often see him around here recently.」

At the same time. After losing Safida again, Sazarf's group spread out a surveillance net, gathering witness accounts from the citizens in their designated search area. Their assumptions about the target were accurate, and they asked the vagrants in the vicinity with a sketch of the suspect.

「I don't know the details since he isn't part of our group, he is hanging around with the brats living on the streets. If you want to catch him, well… You can just search the brat's hideout.」

「Where is that place?」

Sazarf suppressed his anxiety as he asked, while taking out a simplified self made map. He added annotations by referencing what he heard, and Melza beside him said:

「I want to ask a question. There seems to be a lot of vagrants given the size of the town. Has it always been like this? Or is there some reason?」

「Oh, about that… Half of them wandered here recently, I heard a big communal living group or something dispersed recently. Won't you know more about this?」

Sazarf immediately knew why when the man asked in response. A group gathered together for communal living— that must be the

Peace Sect. He still remembered the schemes of rebels caused the Empress to fall into crisis, and Haroma Becker was badly injured in her bid to save her.

「So it's the repercussion of that incident...」

「There are many brats who lost their parents or got abandoned. The orphans with nowhere to go gathered together and form several small groups in town. The man in your sketching hangs out with them a lot.」

The more he listened, the more bitter Sazarf's face was… The reason for the orphans' predicament was war and soldiers. As a member of the Imperial Army, was he really free from any blame?

「Your expression is changing a lot, soldier sir— sigh, that's all I can tell you. I won't ask the reason, so go catch them all.」

The vagrant asked for the information fee, so Sazarf gave him some change and a pack of cigarettes. The wavering in his heart remained as he walked forth in the town again.

「Huff～! Huff～!...」

With his ragged breathing suppressed, the man hid in a dark alley that was rather close to the main road.

Safida prayed that he wouldn't get seen by soldiers as he slowly inched towards the light. He turned back to search for the girl, and was getting close to the spot where he ran into Sazarf.

「... She isn't here...?」

He searched for the girl but couldn't sense her presence. Safida couldn't shout out loud and held his head— in that case, should he return to their hideout? But what if there was an ambush there?

「—Old man?」

The man in a state of panic and anxiety turned to that call, and he saw the girl he was looking for behind him.

「Y-You— got away?」

「That's my line. I was searching for you, why are you here again?」

The girl said with a dumbstruck face and approached Safida. He couldn't help checking her out, and was relieved that she wasn't hurt.

The girl didn't know what he was thinking and tilted her head confusedly.

「— Never mind. Anyway, let's go back to our hideout. There are people searching for you all over town, you might get caught if you go out to the road.」

「... B-But, they will search here sooner or later...」

「They will probably come, but there's lots of hiding spots around here. The road leading out of town is being watched, so we can only hang on here. Either the old man gets caught or they give up and go back.」

The girl said with a firm voice. Her extremely calm demeanour made Safida speechless. The girl approached Safida who couldn't step forward and held his hand without any hesitation.

「So, let's go back to the hideout. Everyone is waiting for us to eat, and we can't run on an empty stomach?」

「... Yes...」

And so, he let the girl hold his hand and walk forth. The man who lost his place in society returned to his home with an orphan girl who was young enough to be her granddaughter. They avoided the bright roads and sneaked from alley to alley, avoiding the scornful eyes of the people from the world of light.

「......」

「... Old man?」

Liquid spilled from the man’s eyes. He didn’t know why he was crying or how long since he last cried, Safida was crying for a reason aside from fear… The girl glanced at him before facing forward quietly. She didn’t let go of his hand and the two of them continued on forward.

They carefully advanced in the alley, avoiding the attention of others, and finally reached their hideout before dusk. The girl opened the board which served as their door energetically.

「Hey～ I’m back. The old man is safe too. Let’s eat—」

The girl’s voice echoed in the quiet room, but there was no reply. The noisy children would usually welcome them, but she couldn’t even hear any breathing right now.

「...? Where did everyone go?」

The girl cocked her head in confusion, and Safida felt a chill down his back… the children’s abode was messy, but the scene before him was like...

「... Someone had broken in.」

「Huh?」

「Don’t make a sound!」

Safida said sharply, then placed his palms by his ears to listen carefully. The sound of the girl turning, noise from afar— and the sound of many footsteps and muffled voices.

「H-Hey!」

Realizing something had happened, Safida picked up a laundry rod and charged out of the hideout. He chased after the noise and travelled down a few alleys— In a place between two buildings with crates filled with trash, there were several men dragging kids with them.

「Stop right there, criminal scum～!」

Safida charged over with an angry yell and swung the rod at the face level of those men. They backed away in surprise, and Safida snatched the kids back during that gap.

「W-What are you doing—」 「Are you with these brats?」

The men glared at Safida who was shielding the children behind him. The girl who caught up later held her breath at that scene.

「Old man, they are human traffickers… I heard they are loitering around here and targeting orphans...」

Her words made Safida realized his gut feeling was on point. The men quickly recovered from their confusion and intimidated him with low growls.

「We are only targeting brats, this has nothing to do with middle aged men— I can still let you off now, so leave the brats and scram.
」

The men threatened as they pulled out knives. Eek! The children yelped from fear. Safida and the men glared at each other for a few seconds, before lowering his rod.

「... You will really let me off?」

「Old man?」

The girl wailed as she watched Safida. The men smiled sinisterly— Safida used that chance to kick the crate filled with trash.

「Uwah?」「D-Damn it—!」

The men covered in trash backed away. As the girl watched on stiffly, Safida pushed the backs of the children.

「Run! Everyone, spread out! Even if someone gets caught, don't turn back!」

The children snapped out of their stupor and ran. He swung his rod to keep the men in check, then followed them. The girl at the rear of the children yelled behind her.

「Those guys are chasing us, old man...!」

「Don't panic! Pick paths that adults can't pass through! You have the terrain advantage!」

Safida ordered, and the children recalled their advantage. They spread out into alleys, then squeezed into the cramped space between buildings or slid into gutters. The men cursed when they saw that, but because of their numbers and size of their bodies, it was difficult to capture all the children.

「Good, and now— Ah, what about you, old man?」

After the last child fled, the girl who was about to escape through an alley realized this and asked. Safida who was at the very back answered with a cramped smile.

「I will pretend to be a soldier for a while.」

He said as he turned left at the T-junction and sticked to the wall. The girl stopped too. When a pursuer turned around the corner— Safida whacked him hard with his rod.

「Hyaa—!」「That hurts! Y-You bastard...!」

「Retard! Ambushes are the basics in dealing against pursuers!」

The man who was hit right in the face staggered, and Safida ran again with the girl. They turned right and ran into a narrow alley wide enough to fit one person. He then turned and faced them again.

「A narrow path favours the smaller force! Even better with range weapons!」

He thrust his rod out the moment he turned. The rod hit the enemy caught in surprise, and the momentum of that man doubled the impact. That man keeled over holding his throat.

「Guahh...!」「Hey, you are in the way, scram!」「You're blocking the path!」

If someone stops in the narrow path, everyone would get blocked. Safida ignored them, then turned and ran.

「Retreat after the conclusion of your sneak attack! Do not pursue the enemy that outnumbers you!」

「A-Amazing! Old man, you are amazing!」

The girl applauded the way Safida toyed with the pursuers. He observed the terrain to consider his next attack, then said to the girl beside him.

「Hey! Don't follow me, you need to run!」

「Don’t wanna! If I’m here, the path will be—」

The girl stopped mid sentence and turned pale.

「Ah— this way isn’t good.」

「What?」

Safida asked puzzledly. However— when he saw the high wall blocking his path, he realized everything without needing an answer.

「... D-Dead end...?」

「Turn back, old man! We still have time—」

The girl grabbed his hand to go back the way they came, but three men blocked their way with weapons in their hands.

「We finally caught up...」 「You two caused quite a ruckus.」

Their eyes were filled with killing intent. Safida and the girl slowly backed away, and was forced into a corner.

「O-Old man...!」

The girl who didn’t have a way out shivered as she looked at Safida. When he saw her eyes, the man made a decision.

「... Don’t worry.」

「Huh?」

After saying that, he took a deep breath, the air filled his skinny chest.

「I’m over here!」

Safida shouted at the top of his lungs. The girl and men were surprised, but he kept on shouting.

「I'm over here, Sazarf! The man you are tracking, First Grade War Criminal Tamshiikushik Safida is here! Get over here! Don't dally～!」

Forced to the brink, he called out to the person who was pursuing him. His voice echoed in the cramped space surrounded by walls, and the girl said in a daze:

「W-What did you say, old man…?」

「Stay back. Just bear with it for a while more.」

Safida told her curtly and took one step forward from the wall. He protected the girl behind him and held the rod as if it was a spear.

「Come at me, you punks— let me say this first, my spearmanship isn't easy to deal with.」

Safida remembered the times he trained for the Officer Cadet School Exams and took a stance. When his opponents saw him resisting at this juncture, they exploded with rage.

「That suits me just fine～!」

The shout towards the evening sky reached the intended target.

「—That voice?」

「Over there!」

Melza immediately found the direction, and Sazarf sprinted with his men. However, he felt something was amiss.

「He is intentionally shouting to draw us over? What is he scheming...!」

「Be careful, it might be a trap! The complicated terrain makes ambushes more dangerous—」

Melza warned to restrain her superior who had been going wild from losing control. Sazarf took it to heart, and stepped into the alley to search for the owner of that voice.

「...? This is...」

「... There are sounds of a fight. He is fighting others before we came...?」

They went deeper and the angry shouts became more prominent. Sazarf's instinct told him that this wasn't a trap, and something unexpected was happening. Even so, he didn't have time to slow down. Bringing Safida back and making him take responsibility for the death he had caused— his goal held strong in his heart. Sazarf passed through the complicated alleys.

「— Is it here!?」

When he turned the corner, a knife was stabbed into the chest of that man.

「–Huh?」

Three knives stabbed into Safida's body. However— at that moment, those men saw the uniformed soldiers had cut off their retreat path and turned pale.

「S-Soldiers—?」 「Damn it, scram!」

The trapped men charged in resignation. But their final struggles were put down by Melza immediately.

「Arrest those men!」

The soldiers with short spears advanced on that order. The spears stopped the men in their tracks, and the soldiers used that chance to pounce on them. One of them was hit in the wrist and dropped his weapon, another man was hit in the shoulder of his dominant arm and screamed. The last man lost his will to fight and raised his arms up.

「Make way!」

Sazarf pushed aside the subdued men and went deep into the alley. When Safida saw him, the last strand supporting Safida's body snapped.

「... You are here, Sazarf...」

The rod fell from his hands, and he keeled over. Blood pooled under Safida's body, which made Sazarf hold his breath.

「—」

「Old man! Old man...!」

The girl rushed to Safida with a wail, and turned him over with all her might. The wound made the girl and Sazarf gasped… Aside from the last three stab wounds, he was cut on his arms, shoulders, chest and stomach— his injury told the story of how hard he fought.

「... I thought I could deal with three punks… I have regressed further than I imagined… Cough cough...」

Blood spilled from his mouth as he spoke, and Melza gave instructions after seeing his wounds.

「He is bleeding out— Medic!」

The soldiers rushed to Safida on that command, and started first aid. Sazarf watched some distance away and said with a trembling voice.

「... What are you doing...」

「......」

「You— Why are you putting your life at risk? No, you shouldn't die this way. That's not how you're fated to die...!」

Sazarf knelt on the ground, grabbed on his collar and shouted.

「You have to— have to apologize to the troops! To all the soldiers who died because of you! Take responsibility and get executed in accordance with the court martial sentencing! That's the only thing you can do, right!? You didn't fulfil any other obligations as a commander, so that is your last duty...!」

Spurred by his rage and guilt, Sazarf yelled as he shook Safida's body. The girl who couldn't watch idly pushed herself between them.

「Stop! Stop it! He will die, the old man will die...!」

「...!」

The girl pushed Sazarf away and protected Safida. Seeing her like this, a hot and painful feeling dwelled inside Sazarf's chest. He came here to end things. To make the man before him take responsibility— so why was a child complaining about this?

「... It's fine, you can step back...」

Safida said with a hoarse voice. The girl turned around in surprise.

「Old man...?」

「It's fine… That man has a reason to do that. A legitimate reason.」

He turned back to Sazarf after saying that. The medic performing first aid turned to Melza quickly, and informed quietly.

「... He has too many wounds, it’s hard to even stem the bleeding. He has minutes at most...」

「—!」

Sazarf’s face contorted in pain. The moment he witnessed Safida being stabbed, Sazarf had an inkling this would happen. He didn’t need Melza to tell him, and realized with a sigh.

「He won’t last until the execution grounds...」

After saying that, Sazarf’s rage and anxiety made him grab his spear. He stepped over Safida and pointed his spear at Safida’s chest. The girl screamed and tried to stop Sazarf, but was held back by the soldiers.

「Yes… This is fine.」

Safida faced the killing intent without shying away. His reaction puzzled Sazarf.

He didn’t understand— Why wasn’t Safida wailing out loud? He was so unsightly during the court martial sentencing, so why could he accept his fate right now?

He even had a peaceful face—

「... What’s wrong, Sazarf? Aren’t you going to kill me?」

But the end didn’t come, which made Safida ask with bafflement. After a long silence, Sazarf said with trembling lips:

「... Why did you protect that girl?」

He looked at the girl subdued by the troops and asked quietly. Safida turned to the girl and raised the corners of his lips— he then looked towards the cramped sky above him.

「After breaking out of prison, I have been thinking— Where did I go wrong?」

「......」

「I finally found the answer. No— I remembered the answer. After a long, long time, I finally remembered the goal I set for myself...」

Safida thought as he spilled his feelings. The merits and medals he got without any effort, and the hollow promotions— those weren't the things he wanted.

When his parents told him he passed the exams, he should have said it was impossible and refused to accept it. When he was standing beside the heroes and praised for his valiant efforts, he should have told them not to look down on him and left. He shouldn't have watched idly with regards to his life moving because of the schemes and machinations of the nobles.

When he was excited by the contents of the war stories in his youth— his goal wasn't to be a farce of a Lieutenant General. He wasn't trying to be a nominal commander.

It was fine even if he wasn't a general officer, or even a field officer. Even if he was a nameless foot soldier far from any glorious exploits, or ended his life in an unknown corner of the battlefield—



「I— always wanted to be a soldier.」

As he looked at the girl he protected to the bitter end, Safida said his real dream he never realized— until right before he died.

Standing up to protect the weak, and risking his life to resist unjust violence.

He didn't need the backings of nobles to do this. He just needed this feeling and moved his own feet forward. If he realized that earlier, he wouldn't have wasted his life away. He wouldn't have lost himself to the schemes of others. He wouldn't bear a grudge and abuse the Shinnack Tribe. He wouldn't have caused the death of his subordinates pursuing the just path of a soldier.

「... It's too late for regrets...」

Sazarf squeezed his voice out. As his consciousness faded, Safida nodded slightly.

「... Yes, you are right—」

With these final words, the man fell silent. Melza checked his pulse and shook her head.

「... He's dead.」

「Old man!」

The freed girl hugged the man's body. Facing the corpse that couldn't speak again, Sazarf shivered— he pulled back the spear on Safida's chest.

「... I couldn't kill him...」

He mumbled in a hoarse voice and thought— *I shouldn't have listened to his last words, I should have stabbed him right away. If I did, I would have killed him. I could have executed Lieutenant General*

Safida as a war criminal, for his sins of causing the death of so many of his subordinates during the Northern Unrest.

「Sorry… I'm sorry, everyone...!」

His spear fell from his hand, and Sazarf turned to the heavens and weeped. Melza walked to him quietly and held his hand. She couldn't find the words to comfort him, and stayed in that position until his tears dried up.

The unit withdrew from the town soon after. Sazarf reported to the Field Marshal through his Sprite— in the course of protecting a civilian girl from rioters, Private Tamshiikushik Safida died in the line of duty.

「Fire—!」

Cannons were fired from the side of the ship on command, and water pillars rose high into the air. The new vessel flying the Imperial flag fluttered in the wind.

「Hard to starboard—!」

The voice of Polminue Jurgus who was in command echoed on the deck. However...

「Turning into the wind again? Hey hey...!」

When they heard that, her colleague, Naval Lieutenant Paume yelled from the ship's aft. Naval Lieutenant Yorin who should be below the front mast had run to the bridge.

「Please keep it in moderation! We have been sailing against the wind since just now! Think about the hassle of managing the sails! We are short handed because we need to man the cannons too!」

In response to her colleagues' complaints, Pommy who was on the bridge cocked her head puzzledly.

「But it can be done, right?」

「That's not the issue here! This isn't a circus act!」

Naval Lieutenant Yorin protested on behalf of the crew, since the Captain was asking for a high difficulty maneuver. Naval Lieutenant Paume rushed on scene, and when the three were about to argue, the pudgy youth rushed to the bridge through the cabin stairs.

「Wait, wait! — Sorry, Naval Lieutenant Paume, Naval Lieutenant Yorin. The maneuver earlier was a request I made to Pommy!」

「Huh?」 「Why did you you— No, Major Matthew, why did you do that?」

Paume and Yorin stared suspiciously at the landlubber. Matthew brushed his hair back and answered.

「Well… the ship is outfitted with Blast Cannons, right? The weight of the cannons will affect the ship's maneuverability, so I want to investigate it as soon as possible. That's the reason behind my request to Pommy .」

Matthew looked at the subject in question, and Pommy gave him a thumbs up with a bright smile. He smiled awkwardly before turning to the two Naval Lieutenants.

「Hence, she isn't fooling around. The more we push the ship to the limit, the better we can see the subtle changes to the ship's capabilities, right? I want to find any problems before we fall into a panic during a live battle.」

He explained to support Pommy. Paume and Yorin were surprised by the humility of their guest, and looked at each other.

「If that is the case...」「I thought she just got too excited because it's the virgin voyage of a new ship.」

「Haha. That played a part too...」

The pudgy youth didn't refute everything and his smile cramped a little. Seeing that their conversation was over, Pommy shouted again:

「You understand the reason for the circus act, right? Then do it again, get ready to turn with the wind!」

「You are still going!」「Ahh～ Really now, you are getting too cocky!」

They started moving while grumbling. Under the command of the woman who inherited the will of Captain Garciev, the ship started sailing again.

「... Oh...」

A few figures observed the situation from a corner of the bridge. One of them was Admiral Erynphin Jurgus.

「Not bad, that's quite a good showing.」

「Y-Yes Sir! Your niece, Naval Lieutenant Polminue, has splendid command even on a Blast Cannon vessel!」

His adjutant standing nearby said tensely. The Admiral grunted and shook his head.

「You… There’s no need to mention Pommy’s name before me. The ship is manned by the entire crew. She is just really excited because of the new ship.」

「Yes Sir— m-my apologies.」

Realizing he had misspoke, the adjutant bowed his head in apology. The long bearded old man beside the two of them added casually.

「However, I’m glad that she had recovered her confidence enough to play around on a new ship.」

「If not, I wouldn’t have entrusted the ship to her. To avoid her acting unsightly like she did on the 『Tyrannosaur』, I retrained her completely, starting from scrubbing the decks. She should be fine even without you watching her.」

The Admiral said to Naval Commander Ragieshī Kutsuchi, Captain of the sunken Tyrannosaur. An old officer who looked stricter than Naval Commander Kutsuchi walked forth.

「Naval Lieutenant Polminue aside, I don’t like carrying something so darn heavy on the ship… We are slowing down.」

「Don’t say that, Higorum. Just like the war on land, the ships are evolving with the times too, so it will be different from our era. Be it the way we fight or our pride as sailors.」

Kutsuchi advised his old comrade. He suddenly turned to Erynphin with a mischievous gaze.

「I heard the new Field Marshal is a pain to deal with?」

The Admiral paused for a few seconds before answering this sudden question.

「... That's right. Of all the things he can say, he just had to tell me to stop being a pirate navy and fight together with the imperial military.」

What he said during the Jurgus and Tetzirich family gathering was still fresh on the Admiral's mind. When he saw the Admiral's complicated expression, Kutsuchi laughed out loud.

「And since he sent the young master of the Tetzirich house over, the Admiral couldn't turn him down～」

「... Because I want to pay back my debts as soon as possible.」

He muttered with a sour face— during that intense battle of Port Nemong against Rear Admiral Elulufay's Fourth Fleet. He owed a lot of debts to Matthew and the other members of the 「Knights Corp」. Since the Field Marshal had put in the request, he had to accept it even if it was a little rash.

「Speaking of which— It's good that we are committed to our training.」

Admiral Jurgus swallowed that fact for now and looked towards the crew again. They were moving around energetically— and he just happened to see Pommy and Matthew locking eyes on the bridge.

「Ah...」 「...Erm.」

They stared at each other for a moment before bashfully waving at each other. Their innocent behaviour made Admiral Jurgus facepalm and sigh.

「Can't we do something about that? It's great that they are getting along, but it's cringy for the crew.」

「S-Should I remind them about that?」

The adjutant took that seriously and asked. The Admiral felt exhausted and answered with a shrug.

「... I'm just kidding, you don't have to react to everything.」

「P-Pardon!」

「Enough. There's nothing you need to do here, go check out the ship's aft.」

The moment he finished, the adjutant immediately jogged to the aft. Naval Commander Kutsuchi looked at that greenhorn with nostalgic eyes.

「Your new adjutant?」

「That's right. It's been a month, but he is still as nervous as a newborn deer, what a pain. He is capable as a communication officer though— there aren't many people who are both smart and brave. 」

He muttered with a sigh— as he was forced to remember the past. Remember a man who knew no fear and responded to him sarcastically. Someone who stayed by his side until the battle of Port Nemong— a person he would no longer treat as an ally.

「You must be living strongly somewhere out there— Let's put an end to this, Danmier.」

His voice was deep and sharp. Erynphin Jurgus' determined voice echoed out into the open seas connected to the enemy territory.

On the same day, the evening when the virgin voyage cum training ended. When the After Action Review in the Officers' Meeting Room ended, Matthew walked along the passageway back to his cabin and plopped onto the bed.

「... So～ Tiring～...」

That was his sincere feelings after his first day at his Navy posting. And it wasn't so simple either. A new environment, new work, new relations— After experiencing that for an entire day, this was the result of his struggles, be it success or failure.

「......」

When the meeting ended earlier, Matthew left after bidding his fiancee a simple farewell. Both of them had time, so they were reluctant— but they couldn't stick too closely together in public when he just reported to work. The slightly plump youth understood very well the meaning behind his deployment here.

「... The times when the defence of the seas is all dumped on the navy… is over?」

Matthew thought back to what the dark-haired youth said during his family gathering… Ever since its formation, its independence had been the Katjvarna Navy's tradition and pride. Their mentality built on the way the legendary Captain Garciev lived his life also got in the way of any cooperation between the Navy and the Army. And so, the biggest goal of Ikuta Solork seconding Matthew Tetzirich into the Navy was to inject a breath of fresh air into that history.

Sharing information about the Blast Cannons was important too, but it was obvious Ikuta was using that excuse to send Matthew there. One reason was the debt owed by Admiral Erynphin Jurgus during the battle of Port Nemong, but unlike his treatment as a guest the previous time, Matthew retained his voice as an officer during his stay in the Navy.

「... Simply put, I have to put on a good showing.」

The slightly plump youth was aware of that. Compared to his ability in military affairs, this mission requires his social communication skills, so he could act as a window to relay the Army's intent. This was only possible for the first time because of his position and capabilities.

「The familiar faces from the 『Tyrannosaur』 are a big help, but it's hard to deal with everyone, so it's tiring. Really now...」

When he was grumbling with a sigh, his partner Sprite notified him of an incoming call. Feeling it was about time to get up, the Pudgy youth responded.

「— This is Major Matthew Tetzirich.」

「Hi, Good Afternoon, my dear Matthew. Is this a good time? Am I disturbing the passionate night you are spending with your fiance?」

Matthew felt at ease because of the old joke, but he didn't show it and snorted:

「Unlike someone I know, I'm not so thick skinned on the first day.」

「Haha, you must had a hard day.」

「More or less… But if I didn't earn their respect in the previous naval battle, they will treat me like a guest this time too. I'm just glad that didn't happen.」

The youth said eagerly. A faint sense of distance wouldn't shake his tough mental state now. Feeling how dependable Matthew was, Ikuta continued chatting happily— but a few minutes later, his tone turned serious.

「Let's talk about something else, I have something to tell you. You will be surprised.」

「Hmm? What is it?」

「We discovered recently that Private Tamshiikushik Safida broke out of prison. However, the matter was closed after Brigadier General Sazarf took care of the search.」

「... Huh? Safida, you mean Lieutenant General Safida?」

This information was so much of a surprise that Matthew forgot to control his volume in the room with poor soundproofing. Ikuta briefly explained what happened, and Matthew crossed his arms with a serious face.

「... He broke out of prison during the coup? It's true that we were too short handed to watch the prisoners back then...」

「No one is at fault here, but General Remeon feels responsible for this.」

「Given his character, I'm not surprised… so how did it happen?」

「According to Brigadier General Sazarf's report, Private Tamshiikushik Safida died before his eyes protecting a civilian girl from rioters.」

The incident was beyond his expectation, and the result surprised Matthew even more. His brain was filled with question marks as he asked again:

「... How did things turn out that way?」

「I wasn't there, so I don't know the details. It seems that he lived with orphans in the slums after he broke out from prison. The children he was living with got attacked by human traffickers while

they were evading the pursuit of the soldiers, and he died trying to save them.」

「That Lieutenant General Safida? Risked his life to save children? ...That man whose only purpose in life is to bully the Shinnack Tribe? 」

Matthew couldn't imagine that being the action by the same person they were talking about, then frowned and cocked his head. Ikuta paused before saying:

「His last words were 『I always wanted to be a soldier.』」

「—!」

「This incident made Brigadier General Sazarf really depressed. I told him it was fine, but he apologized repeatedly, lamenting his failure to bring that person to the execution grounds or dealing the final blow, even though he changed the plan to conduct the search. 」

「... Can I contact him later?」

「Please do. I should console him too, but I took the stance of opposing the search, so I will contact him after some time.」

Realizing how Ikuta felt, Matthew nodded in agreement and thought about Safida's last words.

「Wanted to be a soldier?... He made so many mistakes as a commander, and he said that in the end…?」

「I don't understand. I never thought this way before.」

「That's weird too… Normally, people will think about it. When they read the stories about soldiers and war, they will think about being strong and protecting every one.」

Matthew thought about his childhood, and overlapped the feelings that served as his starting point with those words.

「So Lieutenant General Safida harboured such feelings too? Like what I felt? Then… How did he turned out like that?」

「Not everyone remembers their dreams after growing up. No— it's rare seeing people who have not forgotten, my dear Matthew.」

Ikuta said solemnly. The slightly plump youth didn't refute that, but hesitated to reach a conclusion immediately. He thought more deeply about that man's fall from grace.

「... Maybe there wasn't a back he could chase after.」

「Hmm?」

「He didn't have someone to chase after. Lieutenant General Safida probably didn't have anyone he could model after, and reflect on himself… I can't help thinking that way.」

The youth continued speaking. On the other end of the Sprite, Ikuta waited quietly.

「I always have a back that I can chase after. Yatori, Torway, you… After getting my commission, all of you are by my side. I can discuss things when I'm troubled, and when I see your performance from close up, my competitiveness will well up. However, maybe… This is a fortunate thing for me.」

Matthew thought about his environment and the comrades who were always with him.

「If I wasn't close to you all… Would I have worked so hard all this while? If I only watch from afar as if your accomplishments are something far away… Maybe I will just feel resignation? And feel that

I won't ever be like that, and that your world is completely different from mine.」

「……」

「Also… Lieutenant General Safida is around your father's age— an officer in the same generation as Honorary Field Marshal Igsem and General Remeon, right? I don't know if they ever interacted with each other, but he was probably watching their great feats all the time. And he would compare it to himself and feel envy… And yearning.」

「Maybe… But he never chased after their backs.」

「Maybe they were too distant… If they could talk intimately with each other, and joke like we do, maybe he would realize that the other party are just human, and feel the drive to give chase.

At least, that's true for me. Because I stayed in the same battlefield with you guys, and fought together. On the Arfatra mountain, or on the sea… This has always been my emotional support.」

Ikuta sincerely accepted the pudgy youth's emotional rant, and said:

「If he had good comrades like I did, maybe he would have lived a different life. That's what you think about Lieutenant General Safida's history, right?」

「To be frank… I can't help thinking this way. Am I drifting off topic?」

Matthew asked uneasily. He could feel a sense of rebuttal from the other end of the line.

「No, I think you have a point. I only got so far because of the help from our comrades— I feel the same way too.」

The dark-haired youth concurred without holding back on that point, and continued:

「And of course, we will never know the truth. We are not him, and won't know what twisted Lieutenant General Safida's life. We weren't destined to meet again, or maybe we didn't make good use of our meeting. What can we do at which point to lead to a different path… Since he has passed on, there is no way to probe that possibility.」

All these were deductions made from bits and pieces of information. The pudgy youth was aware of that, and hung his head.

「... Am I thinking about pointless things?」

「Don't be daft. This is important.」

He got an unexpectedly firm response. Matthew widened his eyes as Ikuta continued:

「Everyone has a story. It's a different matter whether it's likable, and there are good and bad people. We are soldiers, so we have to forget that fact and face the enemy… However, if we can't even remember just one day, it will be very very terrifying. When that happens, we will lose our heart on the battlefield.」

A while later, the pudgy youth also realized that Ikuta was warning all the soldiers, including himself.

「When both sides lose their imagination, the only interaction possible would be battle. And so— you have taken good care of it, Matthew... And if possible, I hope you can remind others when you see someone lost it.」

The youth was pleading. Matthew accepted the sincerity in his words and nodded.

「... Yes, I will remind them when the time comes.」

He answered with a vow. Matthew could feel Ikuta's smile. Their bonds had grown stronger after surviving all these battles, and they continued to support each other until this day.

Ikuta ended his call with Matthew before going back to the office. Haro was debating intensely with his three adjutants.

「No, like I said, Major Harugo, it's great that you are working hard, but it's troubling if you do our work too.」

「Please don't say that, let me, the newcomer take care of this! You two should rest more to recover from the fatigue you accumulated so far!」

「I'm also a newcomer too… It's awkward for me to stay here without doing anything, so please assign some tasks to me.」

The ones arguing were Major Megu, Major Yuguni and Major Harugo. The quarrel started because of the young member of the Remeon faction, Major Harugo, who was recruited to balance out the veteran Major Megu from the Igsem faction. His abilities were fine, but he was too eager and even wanted to snatch the work of his colleagues.

「Erm, Major Harugo, if you want more work, you should talk to me— Oh, Ikuta-san!」

Haro who was trying to mediate between the three saw the youth had returned and smiled. Ikuta raised a hand in greeting, then walked to his desk and sat down.

「It seems I'm not delegating enough work to you. Don't worry, we have piles of work here.」

He placed a heavy stack of documents onto the desk. Major Harugo's face started to cramp when he saw that amount. Major Megu patted his shoulder with a sigh.

「... You are insisting on doing this alone? Then I won't stop you.」

「O-Of course! This is what I wanted!」

Major Harugo grabbed that stack of papers as if he had no other choice. Major Megu raised the corners of her eyes.

「I take that back, you moron! I need to stop this recklessness! Get over here!」

「N-No no, Major Megu, what are you doing!? Where are you bringing me!?」

「Somewhere that won't bother the Field Marshal! Major Yuguni, come with us too! We need to settle the problem with this guy early!
」

「I concur… I will join you.」

There was only one objection, and the three of them left the office with Ikuta's permission. Their argument grew fainter, and youth said to Haro who was left behind.

「Haro, you can go too. You have lots of work you want to work on in your own room, right?」

「Oh… Right. I will take you up on your offer then. My things are over there, so I will go back from that room.」

Haro bowed and headed to the break room next door. The break room was connected to the office, and was connected to the corridor too. She was planning to head home from there.

Haro went into the room next door, and there was the sound of her packing up and the door closing. The noisiness earlier seemed to be a dream as silence fell around Ikuta.

「... It's already this late?」

It was evening. The light coming from the window turned orange, and cast a long shadow on the furniture. In the quiet office during dusk, only the rhythmic tick of the clock could be heard.

「......」

The tension was gone, and a strange sense of buoyancy covered the youth— there was no work he had to do directly, no one to give orders to, a short moment of peace during his busy lives.

「......!」

Suddenly, he started shivering from his feet. It spread up to his knees, waist, shoulders and arms, encroaching Ikuta's entire body.

「... Damn it, it's happening again...」

「Ikuta—」

Kusu noticed Ikuta's strange condition and called out to him. But Ikuta couldn't even answer his partner and grabbed his own shoulders.

「... Stop. Shivering won't change anything...!」

He tried to suppress the shivering by putting force into his hands. But instead of subsiding, he shook even harder, and he was losing sensation in his extremities. He felt a chill like ice water struck him. Ikuta judged that things were bad, and quickly pulled open his drawer.

「Ikuta, that's—」

Kusu spoke again, but the youth ignored it and grabbed the pouch in the drawer. He pulled it open with his trembling hands, grabbed dark dried grass from it and shoved it into his mouth. He bit and ground it with his molars—

「—! Guu...!」

The unique sense of numbness spread, and a strong sense of nausea made him vomit. He endured it and continued biting the dried grass, but his shivering still didn't subside.

「... Is biting useless now...?」

Ikuta judged with his faint consciousness, then took out rolling paper from the drawer. He spread the dried grass onto the paper and rolled it up.

「... Huff～! Puff～!...」

He bit the twisted roll and asked the Fire Sprite on the table to make a fire. The Fire Sprite hesitated, but lit a fire on Ikuta's urging. Ikuta slowly move the roll in his mouth towards the flickering flame—

「— Why don't you use this instead?」

Just before the roll touched the fire, a steaming cup of tea stopped him.

「...Haro...」

Ikuta looked up in a daze to find a familiar gentle smile. Haro offered him the tea and said in a calm voice.

「It's fine even if you don't drink it. Just smelling the fragrance can calm you down.」

She didn’t push him to act or forced her way through. She waited in that posture for him to decide. After their gazes locked for a long while—

「... Haha… I’m impressed...」

The rolled up cigarette fell onto the floor. In their place, the warmth of the teacup spread through his hands. Ikuta collapsed onto his chair weakly, then muttered with his eyes on the amber liquid.

「... I showed you an unsightly side. I have no excuse...」

From the way the youth usually act, she could never imagine the youth could sound so frail. Feeling a heart wrenching pain in her chest, Haro tried to say with her usual cheer:

「Sorry for scaring you… I pretended to leave and intentionally hid my presence. If I stay by your side normally, you might tense up and act normal.」

When he heard this explanation, Ikuta’s awkward smile turned into self mockery.

「... I asked you to take care of the troop’s mental health, and ended up being the first one in your care...」

「No, you are just the first one I noticed… When did this started?」

Haro resolved herself to ask him the core questions. The youth answered in spurts:

「... I’m usually fine. However, when my work suddenly stops like this, and I relax, the uneasiness will well up… And I can’t stop trembling. It’s been, four, five months… No, about half a year ago.」

「Do you use Coca leaves every time...?」

「I know it’s not good, but it relieves the symptoms the quickest… And worse of all, I can’t even hold a pen in this state.」

He showed her his right hand that was still shaking, then sighed heavily.

「Sigh— I know the reason, this is a symptom of a common mental condition. With how complicated my work is, even I feel like screaming at times despite my nerves. That is surprising to me too—」

The youth tried to brush it off as a joke, but Haro grabbed his shoulders. She stopped her and said clearly:

「...Ikuta-san, please lose your reason.」

「... Huh?」

「You can’t calm down. When you can’t stand the pain, you can’t treat your sufferings coldly… Please look around you. There’s no one aside from us here. No matter what you say or what you do, no one will blame you.」

She urged him to release the shackles in his soul with that. When the youth remained motionless, Haro smiled at him.

「Sorry, but this time— I will be bold.」

「Ehh—」

Before Ikuta could even feel surprised, she grabbed his arm and pulled him hard. His body was pulled from his chair, and when he realized it, he fell into the arms of the kneeling Haro.

「Fufu— this is the first time I took the initiative to hug you.」

「......」

「It felt really warm when Ikuta-san hugged me last time. So it’s my turn now.」

She grabbed his arms and squeezed tight. Ikuta couldn’t resist the loving embrace and she got to have his way with him.

「Let me say this first, I won’t let go. Be it two or three hours, even if it's the entire night, I will stick tightly to you. You can’t fool me by pretending to be cheerful. Your tricks won’t work on me.」

「......」

「Fufufu, this is a great perk, I can use mental health management as an excuse to hug the person I like. It makes me worried that I will suffer divine retribution for being so happy. Is there a job better than this in the world?」

Haro said as she pretended to be free of worries, so Ikuta wouldn’t feel concerned. The warmth of her body and the beating of her heart was transmitted to him through the uniform. Basking in that warmth, the reason binding Ikuta quietly relaxed––

「........... I’m really scared.」

A while later, quietly...

He said depressing words he had been holding in.

「––Yes.」

Haro accepted his words unwaveringly. As if an underground stream finally found an opening, words poured out of the youth’s mouth.

「Whenever the dusk comes, this feeling will intensify. Did I forget to do something critical? Did I make any mistakes? Are the things I’m trying to accomplish even feasible?–– I’m helplessly uneasy.」

How many years had it been since the youth was allowed to share his unfiltered thoughts?

「The clashes with Kioka in war and diplomacy. Maintaining the internal affairs of the Empire. And above all, protect Chamille's heart.

If I can narrow my focus, I want to concentrate on that last point… But I can't do that. Because Chamille won't abandon her citizens or her responsibilities as a royal. She can't separate herself from the country.

That side of her— really resembles Yatori.」

He said with a sob. The more he said, the more intense he trembled.

「I— I might fail again. Maybe it will be just like that coup, after dragging countless lives down into the mix, I still didn't save the person I wanted to rescue. If I lose on the battlefield to Jean Arkinex, lose strategically to Ario Kyakushii, or fall for Trisnai Izanma's schemes— my worst fears will come true.」

「......」

「I won't let them get their way. I won't give in to such an ending. However— I-I already know that no matter how perfect my preparations, how well laid my plan is, there are no guarantees in war. The twins, illogical and unreasonable, will snipe at my heart in unexpected moments. And I'm far from being omnipotent and omniscient enough to even know what the future holds a few short days later.」

He was shouting towards the end. He couldn't endure the chill creeping up his back, and hugged Haro with all his strength.

「What should I do, Haro? I already promised her— that no matter what happens, I will protect Chamille. I made a promise I can't break

on the battlefield that had no guarantees… Whenever I remember this fact, fear would well up in my heart. I can't stop trembling as if ice was in my veins...!」

The tears rolling down Ikuta's cheeks seeped into Haro's uniform. She accepted his feelings completely, then whispered into his ear.

「You are doing well— you are incredible, Ikuta-san.」

Haro said to him and gently patted his back. Tears were falling down her face too. The youth felt a lot of uneasiness, and now, she understood his struggles and pain.

「I know that too. Working harder than anyone else, until you have nothing more to give— after giving it all, but I still can't touch my goal. Especially on the battlefield… This cruelty permeates from the frontlines to the rear.」

Haro thought about her times on the battlefield and continued:

「Like a field hospital. There are many patients that can't be saved even if we treat them, and I have witnessed the last moments of many of them.

… But Ikuta-san, there is one thing I want you to know. What do you think the patients beyond saving tells me?」

The youth in her arms sobbed. Haro searched through her memories for the words that could stop his shaking.

「There were all kinds of contents. Some call for their mother, some cried for the lover they were leaving behind, and some cursed at no one in particular.

However— what I heard the most were words of gratitude.」

The moment she told that to the youth, the sobbing in her arms lessened. Sensing a ray of hope from that reaction, Haro continued:

「When they realized they can't be saved, many of them thanked me. They didn't blame me for being powerless, and thanked me for my efforts… They offered their gratitude with very gentle words.」

「......」

「I realized then that even if it didn't yield any results… for many people, just having people trying to save them was a form of salvation itself.」

Haro declared with confidence. Because her feelings proved that wasn't a lie.

「Do you still remember, Ikuta-san? When you told me to come back, and it is fine even if I'm not a good girl.

I was saved from that moment on, and won't mind even if I suddenly die now. However— if I can choose my last words, I will not hesitate to thank you. I would want to tell you, Yatori-san, Torway-san, Matthew-san and Her Majesty Chamille, thank you for meeting me, calling me your friend and spending a warming time with me— After expressing my gratitude, I will accept death with salvation in my heart.」

Haro told him and embraced the youth tighter. With the love welling out from her chest, she conveyed all her feelings through words.

「Even if the future isn't smooth, even if our efforts don't bear fruit, I have decided to tell you this when the time comes.

If possible— can we rehearse it?」

She said as she gently brushed his hair. Her words were gentler than anything she said in her life.

「Thank you for your hard work, Ikuta.」

It was like magic.

The moment he heard that, the youth's trembling disappeared like the receding tide.

「... That's sly, Haro.」

Ikuta said softly while he leaned on Haro. Nostalgia and bashfulness made him pouted a little.

「This is foul play. Because I always cried when my mother says that to me.」

The memory of his beloved mother stopped his shivers. Haro embraced him gently, reminding him of the first happiness he experienced in his life. He remembered the warmth that would never fade.

「Ahh...」

The youth pressed gently on Haro's shoulders. He pulled himself up, wiped his tears away and looked right at her.

「Thank you, Haro. I'm fine now— you can tell, right? I'm not pushing myself.」

He grinned and showed a strong smile. After seeing that, Haro had a complicated expression between smiling and crying.

「Yes, I can tell— it's a pity. I wanted to keep hugging you tightly.」

She made a joke that had a hint of sincerity. Ikuta quietly embraced Haro tightly again when he heard that. His hug contained all the

feelings of intimacy that the youth had, and was as strong as the feelings she showed to him.

— No one but him knew about this memory from a long time ago.

「— Did you changed your mind?」

That voice echoed in the dim dungeon, and the coldness gave him goosebumps. However— the voice from the other side of the iron bars was carefree in contrast.

「I'm still considering it. Sorry, can you give me some time?」

— A man in uniform was saying in a tone like he was pretending to be retarded. He was of average height, had a wide chin, and his pupils were relatively small, the appearance of a typical tired middle aged man. However, the rank insignia on his shoulders didn't match all of that.

「Just to confirm— how long do you actually need?」

「Around five or six years. It's my nature to think things very thoroughly before making a decision.」

The man in the jail— Imperial General Bada Sankrei, casually answered Trisnai's question. Trisnai sighed without a word.

「So you want to die in prison?」

「I don't have such a fetish. It's just that… From the looks of things, I can't pick where I will die.」

Bada muttered with his back to the cell wall. What he said made the Fox frowned for the upteenth time.

「I gave you a choice, so why not choose to live?」

「Hmm?」

「Subjugate the Igsem, and lead the next generation of the Imperial Army as the new Field Marshal— if you resolve yourself to do that, I will release you from your cell. You will get to live, and you will receive status and glory. I don't understand why you are rejecting this. You won't lose anything, and can even leave your name in Imperial history.」

The fox's face looked confused. Smiling wryly at his ignorance, Bada said:

「Leaving my name on the tomb is enough. Losing the lives of my friends and the children's future is a terrible deal.」

「Compared to making the Empire great again, no sacrifice is too great.」

Trisnai declared without any hesitation. His sense of value made Bada snorted:

「That might be so for you. You invested a lot of your passion into this. Now that I think about it— treating you like the other corrupted nobles and misjudging your passion must be the reason why I ended up like this.」

He said unwaveringly, as if it didn't concern him. He had already accepted the inevitable.

「But there is one thing that bothers me. Is that your only wish?」

Bada looked at him with analytical eyes, as if to say he was more interested in that, compared to his inevitable fate. Trisnai frowned:

「— What do you mean?」

「It's a simple question. Reviving the mysterious Katjvarna Royal bloodline in modern times. Ignoring whether that really exists, is

realizing that your only wish? I can't help thinking that your real wish is dwelling somewhere deeper.」

He said as he fiddled with the small table at the corner of the cell, and continued saying with his back to Trisnai.

「I want you to think back, when did you first start pursuing this goal?」

「......」

「If it stems from your wish for more authority and power, then it's a simple matter. Because achieving your wish means self actualization. Whether it's good or bad aside, it's a straightforward wish. However— the baffling thing is why you don't wish to take the throne yourself. You wish for the prosperity of the Empire more than anyone else, but don't see yourself as an equal to the Royal family. To me, that's unfathomable.」

Bada said as he poured into a glass with the teapot on the table— He suddenly looked up, as if he just thought of something.

「Oh— I see. It's not the goal, but the means.」

Bada turned to the fox with a glass in his hand, then said while staring right into Trisnai's eyes.

「Let me ask you in a different way— what are you trying to achieve by guiding the Empire towards prosperity?」

Trisnai's furrowed his brows even deeper. Before thinking about the answer, he couldn't figure out the intent of the question. Seeing that reaction, Bada took out a paper sachet from his clothes.

「If my speculations are wrong, you can just ignore them. But if it bothers you— then you will have to think about it sooner or later. Because that will have a decisive effect on your life.」

He said something vague like advice or a riddle, then poured the contents of the sachet into the glass. Trisnai watched his every move closely.

「I said too much. Looks like I can't drag this on any longer, time to say good bye.」

Bada gently shook the glass to mix the content as he said that. There was no hesitation in his actions— He knew right from the start that he would endanger his friends by staying alive.

「It's a little embarrassing to say this myself— But I had a good life.」

Bada said with a bashful smile before the fox— then drank from the glass with that smile on his face.

「—...」

Shortly after witnessing the last moments of that man, Trisnai Izanma got up from his short nap and opened his eyes.

「... I have a strange dream at this juncture, huh.」

He muttered in the lonely office, his mouth scrowled with displeasure just like he did in the dream.

「You are foolish, Bada Sankrei. If you made the right choice back then— the one leading the Imperial Army now would have been you.」

He got up from the chair after saying that and walked to the window. The admin officers and soldiers bustling around the palace filled his field of vision.

「Look, with the awakening of Empress Chamille from her slumber, the Empire is slowly remembering its ideal form, and is searching for the right path. We are on pace to return to the mythical times, so what is there to worry about?」

Trisnai said with a mesmerized face, then slowly returned to his chair and sat down. He then said to the Royal Sprite on his desk.

「This is Archbishop Trisnai Izanma— Can you hear me Your Holiness?」

After saying that, there was a short pause before an old woman's voice came from the Royal Sprite:

「... Yes, I hear you loud and clear, Villainous Minister.」

That wise voice definitely belonged to the head of the Ra Saia Alderamin, Jenancy Labutesuma. Trisnai nodded happily and said to the other party who was a great distance away:

「I'm really glad. I will be in your care in the future too.

… Hey, you should understand too. I will lose my head one day, but not yet. I still want to support the brilliance of Her Majesty, the rule of the Eternal Sprite Tree bloodline— and stand beside the glorious throne.」

There was a madness in his eyes that had no signs of ever fading, as Trisnai told the other party as if he was singing praises. The Pope on the other end of the Royal Sprite fell silent… As if the ominous feeling from the distant land made her feel a chill down her spine.

Credits

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